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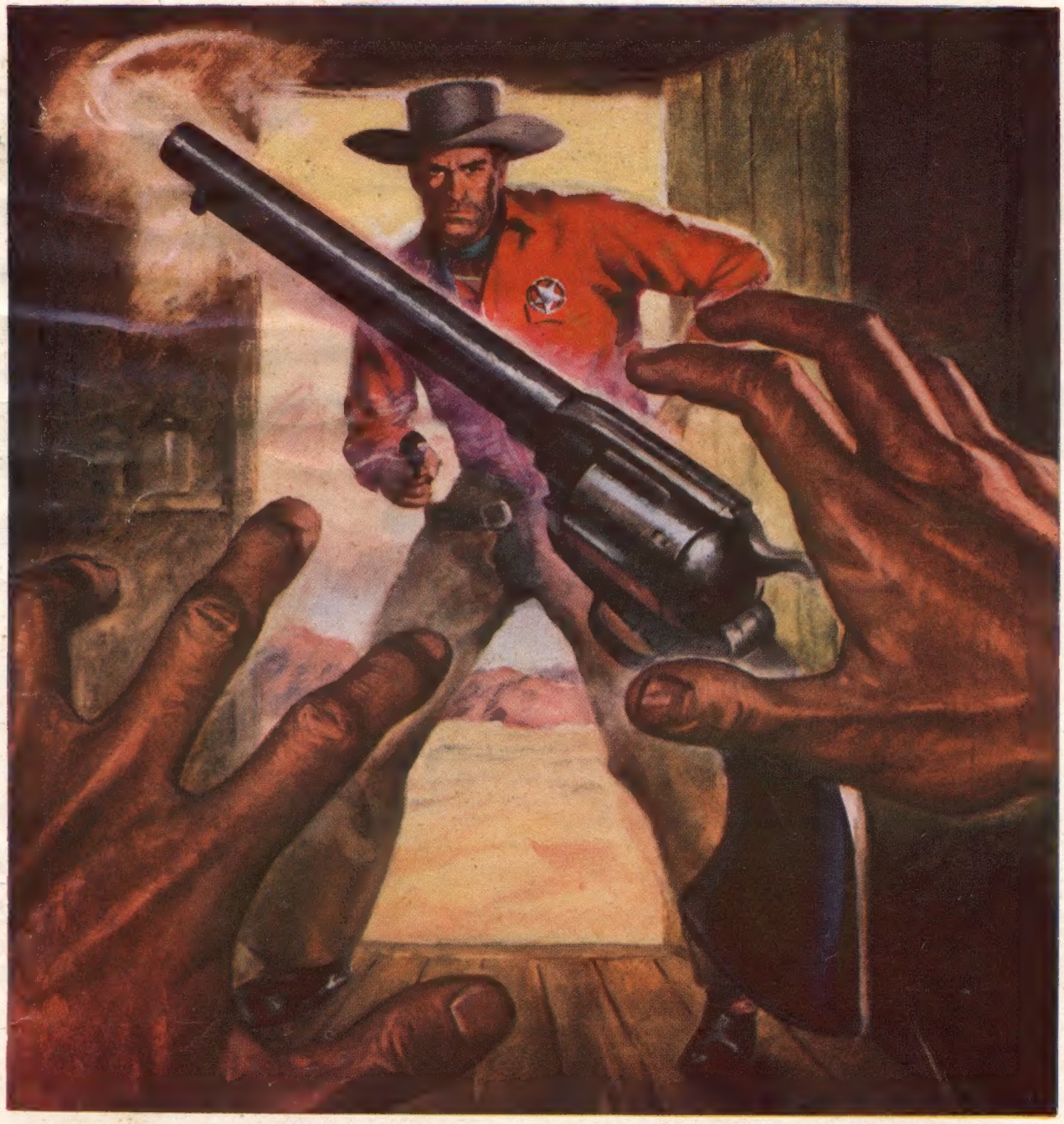

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 47, No. 3 AUGUST, 1952

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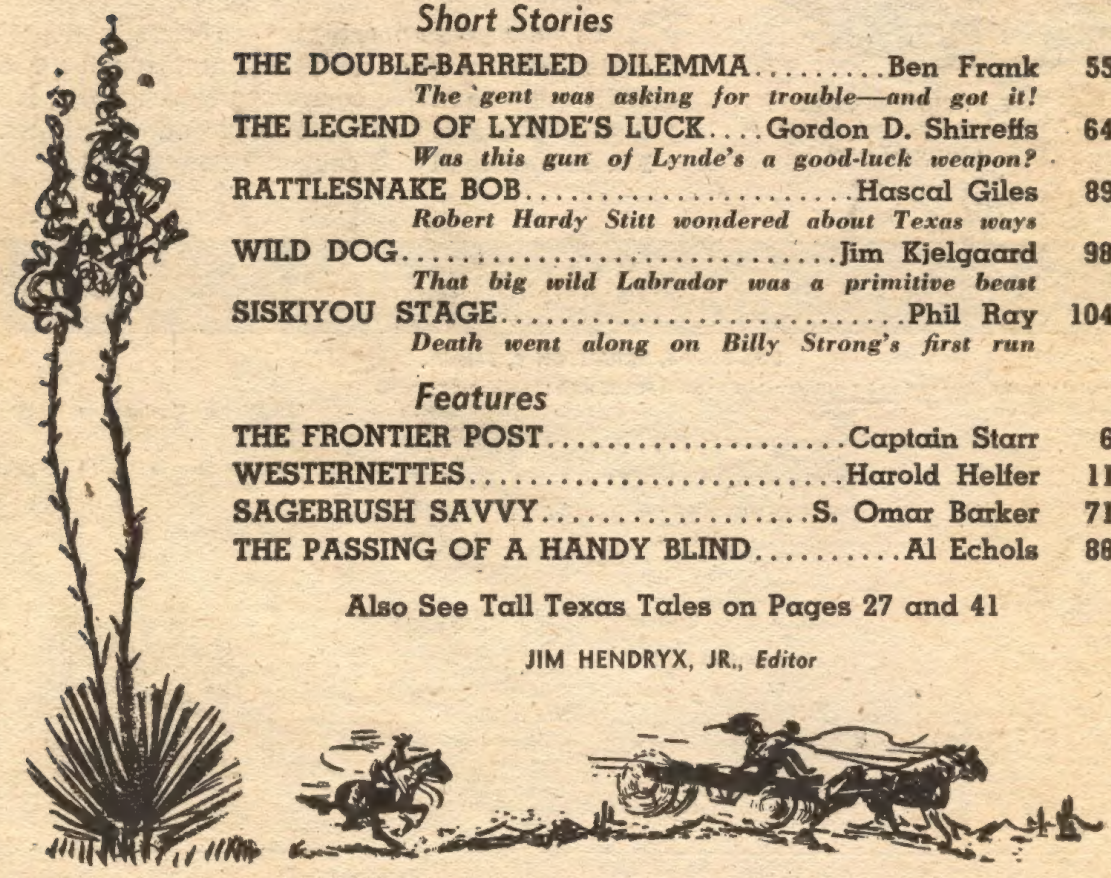
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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Law—Without Order

"I'VE read this here book from cover to cover, and nowheres in it does it say one damn thing about it being agin the laws of the State of Texas fer a man to shoot and kill a Chinaman. So I reckon I'll have to find the defendant, not guilty!" So went the famous decision of Judge Roy Bean, Law West of the Pecos.

In the days of the Old West, "law and order" was a loose term. It could mean anything from a decision by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to the personal opinions of some grim-mouthed gentlemen who were calmly tossing a rope over the limb of a cottonwood tree. Most Westerners liked the law well enough, but they weren't altogether sure that it ought to be out West. The respect of many for law varied proportionately with the quickness of the sheriff's gun hand.

All in all the West felt that the range had a pretty good set of rules of its own and resented outside interference. In fact, in some sections the name "son-of-a-gun" stew was changed to "District Attorney" stew.

Court Shenanigans

This indifference to formal law was expressed quite freely in the courts. In one Western court two attorneys heatedly continued their argument even after the jury had withdrawn. When accused of misreading a point of law, one lost his temper completely and called the other a lying s.o.b. His opposition countered with a like character estimate.

The courtroom quieted in anticipation of hearing the judge assess fines upon the lawyers. However, he spoke calmly.

"I'm very happy that you two gentlemen are now acquainted. May we proceed with the case?"

In another court a certain lawyer who was noted for his oratorical abilities undertook to discuss at great length a point not entirely relevant to the case. As he was about to reach the emotional peak of his delivery, a jackass suddenly began singing outside the courthouse window. The attorney for the opposition came to his feet.

"If the court pleases," he announced gravely. "I second the opinion of the attorney on the outside."

During early Fort Smith, Arkansas, days a horse thief was brought before Judge Isaac C. Parker. The man was given a severe tongue lashing and fined $200. Upon hearing the fine the horse thief thought he was going to get off lightly, and he jerked from his pocket a big roll of bills. Eagerly he began to peel off twenties.

"And twenty years in prison," Parker added. "See if you can pull that out of your hip pocket!"

Smooth Talk

Another young citizen of the West was arrested for horse-thievery and brought to trial. The evidence was strong against him, but his lawyer went around the facts of the case, concentrating instead on the emotional values of the accused's widowed mother, wife and children. As a final touch he called upon the jury to gaze into the face of the defendant to see if they could find the look of a guilty man. Evidently they did not find such, for they

(Turn to page 8)

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LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

retired and returned quickly with a "not-guilty" verdict.

After the trial a friend of the young man's came up to ask confidentially, "Did you really steal that hoss or not?"

Bill scratched his head. "Wal," he said, "I can't really say. I thought I did, but after hearin' that there lawyer's speech, damned if I'm so sure."

Most infamous of all Western courts was that of Judge Roy Bean of Langtry, Texas. Roy was known to be much less interested in justice than in the jingling in the pockets of whoever might be so unfortunate as to stand accused before him. One of his most recounted decisions concerned the occasion when the body of a dead man was found near Langtry. On the corpse was a six-shooter and $40, but no identification. Judge Bean stuck the six-shooter in his belt and fined the "defendant" $40 for carrying a concealed weapon. Sometimes death was no escape from Bean's brand of justice.

On one occasion in his court, which was held in the Jersey Lily Saloon, a young lawyer was prosecuting a case and continually objected to Bean's rulings and judicial opinions. Bean likewise continued to over-rule his objections. Exasperated, the lawyer threatened to *habeas corpus* his client. Judge Bean had no idea what that meant, but he didn't like anyone throwing big words around in his court. He threatened to *hang the lawyer* unless the man behaved himself. The case was dropped.

More Beanery

Bean once wanted to even the score with a man, a rancher whom he suspected of having caused the whiskey of the Jersey Lily to be spiked with kerosene. Finally one day he found his chance when a couple of young bulls belonging to the cattleman broke loose and drifted into Langtry. Bean had them caught and put into the Bean corral.

When the rancher came to get them, Judge Bean told him that he would have to pay damages. The man demanded to know what damages the bulls could have caused. There were no crops around Langtry, and all the fences seemed to be in good order.

"Hell," Bean answered. "Worse than that. I had a couple of young innocent heifers here, and them bulls ruint their virtue."

Roy also had his ideas about affairs of matrimony. When someone questioned his legal right to grant divorces, he answered, "Hell! I married 'em, didn't I? If it was a mistake, I got a right to rectify it, ain't I?"

Cattle auctioneers are quite often known under the title of "Colonel," and one was once called to testify in court. The prosecuting lawyer worked very hard to knock a dent in the Colonel's testimony but did not succeed. Angry at his failure, the lawyer took up sarcasm.

"You call yourself a colonel," he said. "Now just what outfit were you a colonel in?"

"Wal," the other returned without hesitation. "I reckon you'd call it the cow brigade."

The lawyer sneered. "Then you're really not a colonel at all?"

"No," the auctioneer replied calmly. "It's just like the 'Honorable' in front of your name—it don't mean a thing!"

Never Outdone

One of the best "sure thing" men that ever hit the town of Dodge City was Mr. Bobby Gill. Once when broke, he was arrested for some minor offense and brought before the police court. He was fined $20 and costs. Now Bobby was no small-timer, and around Dodge he had made a certain reputation. The marshal felt sorry for his having to face such a small fine and offered to throw off his part of the costs. The clerk agreed to do the same, and the Judge said, "So will I. Now, Mr. Gill, do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Bobby rose promptly. "Your Honor," he said, "I have never yet been out-done in generosity. I will throw off the fine."

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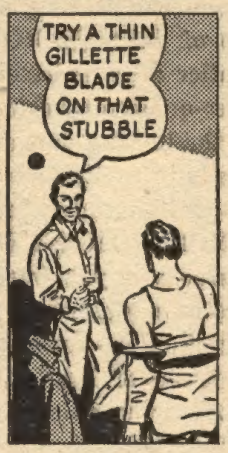
HUNTING HAWK MISSES HIS KILL BUT THEN...

FALCONRY, AN ANCIENT SPORT, STILL SURVIVES AND BEN DAIL IS SHOWING HIS SISTER HOW IT'S DONE

AND SO AFTER A DAY-LONG CROW HUNT WITH HAWK AND GUN...



SO IF YOU KNOW ANYONE WHO'S LOOKING FOR A TURBO-JET EXPERT
WHY, BEN! UNCLE BOB HAS BEEN COMBING THE COUNTRY FOR MEN LIKE DICK
HE'S HANDSOME

MEN, WHEN IT COMES TO EXTRA SHAVING COMFORT, PLUS ECONOMY, **YOU CAN'T BEAT THIN GILLETTES.** THEY'RE KEENER AND LAST LONGER THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICE BLADES. YOUR FACE IS PROTECTED FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION, TOO, FOR THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. **ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES** IN THE CONVENIENT 10-BLADE PACKAGE

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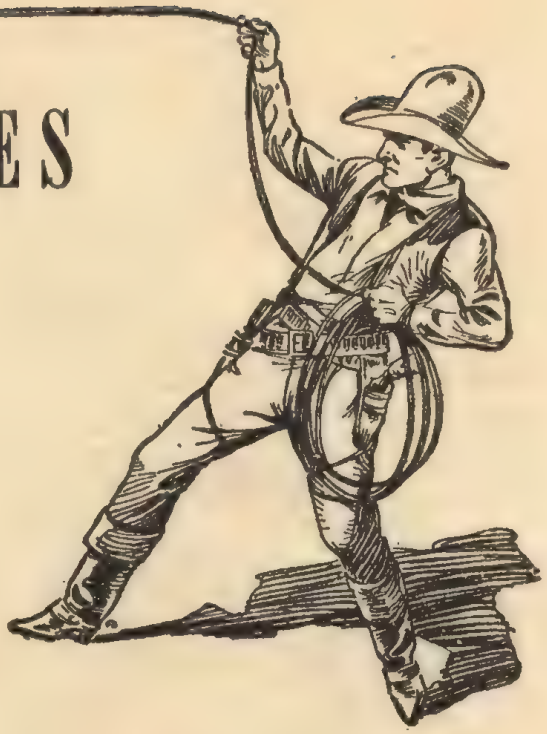
WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER



Gold was first discovered in California in the roots of wild onions. On March 9th, 1842, Francisco Lopez, while resting from his labors (not described) saw wild onions growing nearby. On pulling them up, presumably to eat, he found particles of gold adhering to the roots. The moral: rest can be more valuable than work—if you know your onions.

Contrary to popular belief the lariat did not originate out West with the American cowboy. People have been using lariats for well over 2000 years. Which doubtless accounts for the success of a gal named Cleopatra in roping a couple of gents like Caesar and Anthony, away back there about 50 years before Christ.

Youthful "cowboys" with water pistols will be able to reload now without leaving the arena of action—thanks to a water-carrying holster on which a patent has been issued. Shades of William Bonney!

F. F. Wasinger of Ellis County, Kansas, is inducing his cows to produce more milk by playing them music. He claims his cows are happier and more generous with their milk when they hear the strains of soft music. Furthermore, it seems the music stimulates the milkers, too, causing them to work harder and tire less easily.

During a recent Wyoming-Montana infestation of grasshoppers, the pests numbered as many as 2000 per square yard. Just to be ornery, do you suppose we should demand a recount?

Utah's population is 68.8 percent Mormon. And though we hope it won't worry you too much, it is the only state that permits execution by a firing squad.

Further proof to our moral that it pays to rest can be found in the records, where Clarence Warner, a prospector, is said to have discovered the world's largest copper deposit in the Chitna River district in Alaska, while pausing to rest. This was in the year 1900, no less.

In San Francisco, during the height of the gold rush (1849) sailors deserted their ships by the thousands. Experienced seamen were hard to obtain, and at one time over five hundred ships were stranded in the bay. Many of these ships rotted at their moorings, while some were turned into saloons or boarding houses.

Horace Coleman, refereeing a duel between two pals, caught a slug in each leg. This happened in Texas, of course.

SILVER

Jim hammered away with his Winchester until it was spent

of the SAN SABA

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

When an exploration party seeking a fabulous hoard of lost silver vanished without a trace, even the famed Lone Wolf of the Rangers was baffled

CHAPTER I

San Antonio

THEY STOOD before the ruined Alamo, its scarred broken walls mellowed by twilight, the towering raw-boned Texas Ranger and the trim, neat man from Washington. An almost reverent silence was on the earth, of which the faint chiming of faraway mission bells seemed a part rather than a disturbance. The horizon was washed with soft pastel shades from the afterglow of sunset, and the bullet-pocked adobe of the Alamo bulked gaunt against the colored sky.

Lloyd Seagrave, thin cigar in mustached mouth, glanced up at his tall companion with faint surprise and amusement. The Alamo was a sacred shrine to all Texans, but Seagrave hadn't expected to find any streak of sentiment in Jim Hatfield. On the verge of speech, Seagrave checked himself and went on puffing his cheroot. No sense in aggravating the big Ranger, when they had to work together. There had been a slight instinctive antagonism between them from the start, but there

was also mutual respect. Each knew that the other was a top ranking man in his field.

Staring at the ancient mission with solemn gray-green eyes, Jim Hatfield was seeing those embattled walls back in 1836, as he always did in his mind when he looked at the Alamo. Long before he was born, yet Hatfield could visualize the scene as if he'd been present.

He could see Crockett swinging his rifle butt before that wolf-pack of Mexicans buried him deep in that blazing courtyard. He could see Bowie, dying in bed, meet the inrushing Mexicans with pistols and the famous knife the smithy, James Black, had forged for him in Arkansas.

It always left Hatfield awed and saddened, but filled with a quiet pride. The Alamo, where a hundred and eighty-three Texans held off Santa Anna's army of six thousand Mexicans for thirteen bloody days, before dying to the last man.

"Hallowed ground, eh?" said Seagrave finally.

Roused from his reverie, Hatfield nodded shortly. "For Texas men."

He turned back toward the center of town, and they walked for some distance in silence under the chinaberry trees. Yucca plants and flowering cactus grew in some of the yards, and Cherokee roses perfumed the soft evening air.

SAN ANTONIO still looked like a Mexican settlement, with its broad plazas and bell-towered missions, adobe buildings and walls with arched gateways. Dark-eyed women in gay shawls, and men in peaked sombreros and bright-striped serapes were everywhere. Americans owned and ran the community, but it maintained its Latin aspects, atmosphere and spicy odors.

There were plenty of Texans in the streets, but somehow they resembled transient visitors more than permanent residents. You could conquer a people, Hatfield thought, but you could not obliterate them or their customs and ways of life. "They were here before we were, and they'll always be with us." A subject race, but still tenaciously present and strangely indomitable.

"You're still inclined to doubt the existence of that silver mine, Hatfield?" suggested Lloyd Seagrave, erect and high-headed to offset as far as possible the Ranger's great height.

"I don't know, Mr. Seagrave. If it's there, it's odd that it hasn't been relocated in all these years."

"Understand the Lipans protected it from the whites for a long time."

"They did," agreed Hatfield. "In Eighteen-thirty-one Jim Bowie took a party up the San Saba to find the Cerro del Almagre, the Red Hill. They saw it, according to legend, but they never got near it. The Lipans beat them off and turned them back."

"Are the Lipans still in existence?" Seagrave inquired.

"In small numbers. But they've been peaceful for years now."

"Bowie's supposed to have seen the mine, I believe?"

"That's the story," Hatfield said. "He made friends with an old Lipan chief, who took him to Cerro del Almgaer"

Seagrave frowned in self-debate. "Could Bowie's word be relied on, Hatfield? No offense, but he was known to be quite a drinking man."

"Most of the old frontiersmen drank more or less," Hatfield said drily. "I don't reckon it made liars of them, though."

"Well, I think there must be some solid evidence that the silver is there," Seagrave declared. "Otherwise the Government wouldn't have sent men like Vantine and Gergen and Wilkins to look for it. You know who guided the expedition?"

"Bostater, a good man," Hatfield told him. "And one of our boys, Milt Travers, went along too. Another good man."

"Something must have happened to them, nevertheless," Seagrave said. "They should have been back before this time. Or at least sent back a report of some kind. What kind of country is it up there?"

"Still pretty wild and rough. All that headwater country below the escarpment of the Staked Plains. A few scattered

ranches, trading posts, and little one-street settlements."

"You don't think the Lipans would attack the exploration party?"

"Not unless they've got some new young buck of a chief, with old ideas," Hatfield said slowly. "A chief who fancies himself as a warrior can always cause trouble."

Seagrave gestured impatiently. "They should be on a Government reservation."

Hatfield smiled gravely. "They wouldn't stay. They live a lot better where they are. Plenty of game and fish left in that territory. Did you ever see agency Indi-

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ans? Reservation life kills them off like a plague."

"Better than letting them kill off white settlers, isn't it?"

"From the white viewpoint, certainly," said Hatfield.

Seagrave threw his cigar down in a small shower of sparks. "This whole mission is rather fantastic. I suppose treasure hunts always are to a practical-minded man." He smiled, with rare pleasantry. "But we have our orders, Hatfield. Nothing to do but follow them up the San Saba River, eh?"

"Reckon so," drawled Hatfield, shaping up a cigarette. "When Bill McDowell sends me somewhere, I generally go there."

"Outside of the Indians, could there be any other hostiles in that region?"

"There could," Hatfield said easily. "Outlaws from the Rio Grande and the Pecos. Fugitives from Mexico and California. It's a good country to hide out in."

Seagrave smiled under his trimmed mustache. "Might be interesting, after all."

"Could be." Hatfield grinned into the flare of the match, and inhaled smoke with relish.

PASSING senoritas glanced at his high, broad-shouldered frame and strong-boned feature with interest and approval. Seagrave noted this with tautened lips. He was accustomed to being overlooked, in the presence of bigger and handsomer men, but never had become quite resigned to it. Fools, he thought, judging a man by his size and shape and looks.

They were nearing the central plaza, and the evening life of San Antone swarmed all about them in the dusky lamplight. Sad Spanish music tinkled from the *cantinas*, and reckless American laughter rang in the saloons and gambling halls.

An oddly contrasting pair, they stood by a corner lamp post and watched the thronged square. Lloyd Seagrave, small and compact, was immaculate in dark broadcloth and white pleated linen, with a black string tie at his throat, a black hat on his haughty head.

He appeared harmless, insignificant, a pompous little minor executive perhaps, but Seagrave had a big gun in a shoulder-holster, a smaller pistol at his waistline, and a derringer somewhere on him. And he was swift, sharp and expert with all of them, it was said. As well as with the rifle and the knife.

Jim Hatfield, head and shoulders above the Government man, wore ordinary range clothes of good material. California plaid pants fitted snugly into hand-made hickory-peg boots that were obviously expensive, and his gun-belt and cut-away

holsters were of the finest leather. A blue denim brush jacket draped easily from the wide, rangy shoulders, with a buckskin vest and fine-checked shirt underneath, and a blue scarf was knotted loosely at his neck. The hat on his crisp dark head was black and weathered, flat-crowned and broad of brim.

Lounging at ease, there was a lithe grace about the Ranger, blended with a hint of explosive power and the tough resilient strength of rawhide. Even without the two low-slung Colts, Jim Hatfield would have been considered a man to reckon with, at first glance.

"What about this Don Cristobal here?" asked Seagrave. "A true Castilian aristocrat, I hear, and something of a mystery."

"A recluse, anyway," Hatfield amended. "Nobody seems to know much about him, except that he is wealthy and has a beautiful daughter named Dolores. And a couple of bodyguards, or three. Castro and Guerra and Juanillo. They are seldom seen outside of the great walled *hacienda*."

"Why the bodyguards? For the daughter or the money?"

"Both, I reckon," Hatfield conceded.

Seagrave was about to light another cigar when he dropped the match and stiffened against the lamp post, peering across the plaza with intent, narrowed eyes, his pale face a cold rigid mask.

"See that old man over there at the corner of the Bella Union, Hatfield? The old wreck of a desert rat. I could swear he is Dr. Vantine, except for the white hair and beard and ragged, decrepit appearance. See? He acts like a man suffering from shock."

The old derelict indicated by Seagrave was slumped in utter dejection on the adobe cornice of the glaring, roaring Bella Union, wagging a shaggy white head in stunned bewilderment. Hatfield studied him, unable to believe it was Vantine, the distinguished scientist, geologist and metallurgist. But Seagrave's interest was undimmed.

"I'd know that profile anywhere, that forehead and thin hooked nose and bony jutting chin! But good Lord, what could've happened to the man? He's only in his forties, and look at him. An ancient broken ruin!" Motioning to Hatfield, Seagrave started across the street.

"Doctor," said Seagrave, as they approached. "Aren't you Dr. Vantine?"

The matted white head jerked up, and vacant, haunted eyes stared at Seagrave without recognition or any other expression. The old man waved a feeble claw of a hand.

"Go 'way, go 'way. Leave me alone."

Seagrave stepped forward. "Van, you remember me, Van. I'm Lloyd Seagrave. We knew each other in Washington. What's happened, Van? Where's the rest of your party?"

"Dead," the croaking voice came in dull response. "Dead, all dead."

Seagrave turned to Hatfield. "It *is* Vantine, Hatfield. But he's in a bad way. We'd better take him to the hotel and call a doctor."

"Take him to our room, Mr. Seagrave," said Hatfield. "I'll bring a doctor."

HE WAS turning away when the hurtling swish of a thrown object brought him whirling around again. Steel glimmered wickedly in the lamplight and struck flesh-and-bone with an audible thwacking sound. The old man straightened up, tall and stark on the adobe, pawing futilely at the knife handle protruding from his wasted, ragged chest. Then with a choked scream he fell forward into the dirt.

The knife had been thrown from the street, and Hatfield wheeled in that direction. There was an upheaval in the mid-plaza traffic, and someone was running toward the opposite side, leaving a rippled wake through the crowd.

"Take care of him, Seagrave," called Hatfield, and started across on the run, holding down on his guns, twisting and driving through tangled masses of humanity.

Over the heads of the throng, he could follow the progress of the fugitive. Finally he saw a slender form in a Mexican jacket and conical hat burst clear, cross a slat

sidewalk, and vanish into the dark mouth of an alley.

Driving harder and faster, Hatfield broke through the startled pedestrians and rammed on into the alley, ducking and weaving in a crouch. Lead howled and tore splinters from the adobe wall at his left, as gun-flame winked red and roaring from the far end of the passage. Clearing his right-hand gun on the run, Hatfield fired at the flitting shadow as it disappeared again, and kept on after the knife-thrower in reckless headlong pursuit.

Hatfield threaded through a tortuous dark labyrinth of alleys and raced across rubble-littered back yards, stumbling over tin cans and rubbish buckets, panting and sweating in the garbage-reeking night air. A high adobe wall loomed at the end of a final passage, the early moonlight full and silvery upon it.

The slim Mexican turned and fired back, the lead singing close as the blast lighted the corridor. Then he was up and over the wall like a cat, with Hatfield's shot raking up stone dust from the just-vacated spot atop the barrier.

Advancing more deliberately, Hatfield perceived with a cold shock that this tall wall was the one surrounding the elaborate estate of Don Cristobal. It wasn't likely a Mexican would trespass there, but a life-and-death matter might have panicked this caballero into risking the wrath of Don Cristobal and his gunmen.

Deciding to take a chance himself, Hatfield sheathed his gun and sprang high against the moon-whitened adobe. His hands caught the upper edge, and he hauled himself up onto the top, creeping to the inner rim. The darkness below was fragrant with tropical plants and flowers, oversweet after the vile refuse of back lots.

Drawing his Colt again, Jim Hatfield dropped lightly into the perfumed shadows of the patio. His boots had barely touched the turf when a gun-barrel crashed down on his head. A blinding flare exploded in his skull, the earth rushed up at him, and then there was only a void of blackness.

CHAPTER II

The Splendor That Was Spain

HATFIELD awakened with a splitting headache, eased somewhat by the damp coolness of wet cloth against his skull. He found himself lying in a vast room of gloomy grandeur, the walls and lofty ceiling paneled richly. The doeskin-covered couch on which he reclined was soft as velvet, and there was a luxurious elegance in all the furnishings.

Lamplight spread its soft golden glow, and a long shadow fell across it. A tall, spare man with keen, refined features and dark, brooding eyes, faultlessly dressed, perfectly poised and assured, proud and serene and patrician. Don Cristobal himself, Hatfield thought, one of the last of the Spanish grandees.

"A little brandy?" The man held out a glass. "And perhaps, senor, you can explain your intrusion?"

Hatfield sat up, slowly and carefully, and swung his long legs from the couch, the doeskin soft in under his hands, the pulse of pain quickening in his head.

"Thank you." He accepted and drained the glass of brandy. "I was following a man who knifed someone in the plaza. He climbed your wall and disappeared inside."

"Impossible! None of these peons dare to enter my grounds, senor."

"This one did—I saw him," Hatfield declared flatly. "As soon as I hit the grass inside somebody bent a gun-barrel over my head."

Don Cristobal sighed. "That Guerra, he strikes with a heavy hand. I am always cautioning him to exercise some restraint. I regret exceedingly that you were hurt, but I cannot credit the explanation of your presence."

"It's still the truth," Hatfield insisted gently. "What other reason would bring me here?"

"That I don't know, senor. There have

been foolish young men who tried in similar fashion to see my daughter. And others who wanted to rob me of something else. More brandy?"

Hatfield nodded with care. The slightest motion of his head started the rocketing pain again. "I'm not interested in your daughter—or your wealth."

Don Cristobal smiled coldly and extended the refilled glass. "You are an officer of the law perhaps?"

"You might say so." Hatfield sipped this drink, savoring the fine flavor and warmth.

"I see no insignia of office. You are not of the local peace officers then?"

"That's right."

"Did the knifed man die, in the plaza?" asked Don Cristobal.

"I've got to go back and find out," Hatfield said. "If I am free to leave now?"

"As an arm of the law, I should expect you'd want to search the premises." There was dry, supercilious mockery in his cultured tones.

"Reckon it's too late for that."

"You insinuate that we have hidden the culprit? Or helped him to escape?"

"I insinuate nothing," Hatfield said, rising to try his legs and equilibrium. "But if that man dies, I'll be back to see you, Don Cristobal."

"Ah, you have me at a disadvantage. Knowing me, while you remain unknown. Is your identity a secret of state, senor?"

Hatfield smiled "Not exactly. I'm Jim Hatfield, a Ranger."

"Ah, yes. Hatfield of the Texas Rangers. I have heard of you, senor, and I am honored by your presence. Although I regret the circumstances. You have credentials, of course?"

"Is this good enough?" Hatfield opened a leather folder, revealing the silver encircled star of the Rangers.

Don Cristobal scrutinized it and nodded his fine graying head. "That is enough, Senor Hatfield. I trust your man will not die, and I pledge fullest cooperation in case you have to pursue this matter farther."

"Why was I hit over the head without any warning?" asked Hatfield.

"Any man who descends within these walls, gun in hand, will be struck down, senor. A citizen has the right to protect himself and his property."

"Why wasn't the Mexican knife-user struck down then?"

"Had he entered here, he would have been," Don Cristobal said smoothly. "In this case, your eyes deceived you, senor."

HATFIELD knew better, but there was little point in arguing about it at the moment. He had to get back to Seagrave and Vantine—if the wounded man *was* Vantine. Whoever it was, Hatfield had little hope of finding him alive.

"Thanks for the brandy, and the care," he said, letting his eyes rove around the somber interior.

Don Christobal hastened to press another glass upon him.

The room seemed to be a combination library and museum. Ancestral paintings and gorgeous drapes hung between great bookcases. Old suits of armor and racks of ancient swords, knives and firearms occupied dim corners. There were shelves of pottery and glassware, showcases of jewelry and primitive curios.

Underfoot the carpets were thick and soft, and overhead huge glistening chandeliers were suspended from the high paneled ceiling. A great stone fireplace opened at the center of one wall, the mantel gleaming with trophies and figurines. The opulence of the room was almost overwhelming.

Spotting an Indian bow and arrows, with a stone axe and woven basket, Hatfield spoke. "Lipan?"

"Yes," Don Cristobal said. "My father did some exploring in the Lipan country."

"Headwaters of the Llano, San Saba and Colorado," mused Hatfield. "Did he strike any silver up there?"

"Not that I'm aware of, senor," said Don Cristobal, smiling. "Our wealth came from the Old Country—if you can term it wealth. We are richer in heirlooms than in money I must confess."

"Well, I've got to get along," Hatfield

"Go inside, Dolores," said Castro. "I shall escort Ranger Hatfield to the gate"

said. Setting down his empty glass, he looked around for his hat and gun-belt.

He was buckling on the guns, when three men entered from the rear on Don Cristobal's invitation. Scanning them, quickly, Hatfield identified them before Cristobal made the introductions.

Castro was slim and infinitely graceful, dark-skinned, with strange golden eyes and tawny bright hair in contrast, his features carved in a kind of satanic beauty. There was the faintest trace of insolence and contempt in his brilliant smile, as he bowed and spoke in a rich melodious voice.

"It is an honor to meet Jim Hatfield, the great gunfighter."

Castro was all in black, slender and sleek as a black panther, except for a white scarf at this throat and the ivory-handled guns on his thighs.

Guerra, broad and bulky, with a scarred, sullen face, apologized briefly for having hit the Ranger, and looked as if he'd like nothing better than the opportunity to hit him again—and harder.

Juanillo was a dapper, pleasant-faced boy, much lighter in complexion than his comrades, with a dimpled smile and a quick merry laugh. He looked youthful and innocent looking, but Hatfield was almost sure it had been light-hearted Jaun who had thrown that blade into Vantine's breast and fled ahead of the Ranger to this walled castle of a house. The youths had changed clothing but his build, movements, the set of his curly head and shoulders, were all familiar to Hatfield, just from the fleeting glimpses he had obtained of the knife-thrower.

Don Cristobal dismissed them curtly, after performing the introductions, and

Hatfield sensed his disapproval of their coming to the room in the first place He then ushered Hatfield out the grand front entrance, and indicated the flagstone walk leading through aromatic shrubbery to the ornamental main gate in the adobe wall.

They shook hands and parted, Cristobal retiring to the inside at once. Hatfield had a feeling he wasn't through with the don as yet. There was something indefinably evil about the polished man and his palatial home.

Hatfield was halfway to the gate when a soft voice reached him from the shrubs, and he turned to see a girl beckoning him off the flagged walk into the shadows. Even in the vague light, Hatfield knew he'd never seen a girl as beautiful as this one. Dolores Cristobal, of course, a waving shimmer of black hair upswept from the broad pure brow. Eyes of dark liquid-fire in a sculptured face, the enchanting wonder of which tightened Hatfield's throat and set his blood to racing like wildfire.

The clean fragrance of her, the purity of the delicate-strong profile, the perfect line from chin to throat as she looked up at him, the full arch of her mouth, the flowing symmetry of her body, all made their impact on the Ranger.

She was whispering, "Senor Hatfield, I must warn you. Stay away from this house and its people. They will kill you, if you don't."

"You know me?" he muttered wonderingly.

"I have seen you," Dolores Cristobal said. "In Goliad, Gonzales, Austin. And once down in Laredo. I—I have always wanted to meet you, senor. But it is no good here. It will never be any good anywhere. Not for us."

"Why should they want to kill me, senorita?" asked Hatfield.

"I cannot answer that. I do not know. All I can say is keep away from them, Senor Hatfield."

"It isn't considered healthy to kill a Ranger in Texas."

Dolores laughed quietly, but with a harsh note in it. "A Ranger to them is just another man. He can be made to vanish without a trace. I don't want it to happen to you, Jim Hatfield. Please believe, and never come back here again."

"Somebody from here knifed a man tonight," Hatfield said.

"Forget about that," she cried. "You will never prove it!"

"I don't understand," Hatfield said, glancing at the massive limestone structure. "What goes on here anyway?"

"Never mind," said Dolores Cristobal. "Just go—please go. And don't ever come back!"

Suddenly, incredibly, Castro was there, without a sound of his coming, like a sleek black cat in the night.

"I thought he had gone already, Dolores," Castro murmured. "But it's not hospitable to urge him on his way." White teeth flashed in Castro's dark handsome face. His eyes shone with a yellowish flare, and his bare head was unnaturally bright where the moonbeams touched it. A beautiful and deadly creature, Castro, the white neckpiece and ivory-hafted guns now decoratively supported by a black charro jacket with fancy white trimmings.

Dolores spun in startled fright, and shrank away from him toward Hatfield.

"Women talk too much," Castro said sorrowfully. "It is a shame that women are ruled by the heart instead of the head. Go inside, Dolores. I shall escort Ranger Hatfield to the gate."

"No, Castro, no!" she pleaded, placing her willowy form between the two men.

Castro laughed. "We have no trouble—as yet. There is nothing for us to fight about, Dolores. Some day perhaps Hatfield and I may stand up and match draws—but not tonight. You are overwrought, senorita. Go in to your father."

With a small cry, Dolores fled along the flagstones toward the ornate entrance of the house, both men staring after her lissome figure.

"Lovely, is she not, senor?" murmured Castro, smiling. "Unfortunate that her brains are not commensurate with her beauty. But one cannot have everything,

I suppose. Come, Hatfield. When Don Cristobal dismisses one, it is best to depart."

Hatfield walked with him to the gateway, his spine slightly chilled by something in the pantherlike man at his side. Castro saluted with a half-bow of mockery.

"Next time you call, Ranger, come to the front door. It is a miracle that Guerra did not shoot instead of clubbing you. And for your sake, I hope you do not see any more ghosts scaling these walls."

Hatfield smiled at him soberly. "I'll be seeing you again, Castro."

"I'm sure of that," Castro agreed smilingly. "And some time, if the fates are kind, we may see one another across the gun-barrels."

"Maybe," Hatfield drawled. "But for that to happen, you'd have to break the law, Castro. And I'm sure you'd never do a thing like that."

Castro laughed in quiet delight, and they parted amiably enough and in complete understanding of what lay between them. Instinctive enmity and unreasoning hatred that would burn on beneath the surface until one or both of them died.

CHAPTER III

The Trail Northwest

AT THE hotel, Hatfield found Lloyd Seagrave in the big room they had engaged, with the blanket-draped form of a man on the raw-hide-slung couch against the wall.

"It was Vantine all right," Seagrave said grimly. "He recognized me when he regained consciousness, and lived long enough to talk a bit—not too coherently. The ordeal he suffered aged him forty years, Hatfield, and turned his hair and beard white. He thought the rest of the expedition had perished. Said it was Indians some of the time, Mexican and white bandits at other times—I take it you didn't catch the knife-slinger?"

"Right. He got away."

Seagrave paced the floor in fretful anger. "The country can't afford to lose scientists like Vantine, Wilkins and Gergen."

"Nor men like old Bo Bostater and young Milt Travers," said Hatfield.

"What's that? Oh no, of course not. But Van said the scout and the Ranger might still be alive, come to think of it. He wasn't certain. He wasn't sure about anything, for that matter."

"Did they find the silver mine?"

Seagrave shook his well-groomed brown head. "No. They found veins of silver in places. And like Bowie's party, they saw the Cerro del Almagre, at the base of which the mine is supposed to lie. But they never reached it.—How large an outfit can we raise, Jim?"

"Hard to say," Hatfield admitted. "There were thirty men in the Vantine expedition. We'd be lucky to raise that many, Lloyd."

"It calls for a couple of troops of United States Cavalry," said Seagrave, with bitterness. "And they send two of us on the job. Well, I'll have to wire Washington, and you'll have to report this to Captain McDowell. Can't do much of anything until we hear from headquarters."

"We can keep an eye on the Cristobal *hacienda*," Hatfield said, and told what had occurred there while Vantine was dying from the knife wound.

"They've got you marked, Hatfield," said Seagrave. "But perhaps I can work out something there. It looks like a good, authentic lead. They wanted Vantine dead before he could do any talking. That would seem to tie them up with the lost mine of the Cerro del Almagre all right."

"Have to be careful," said Hatfield. "They've probably got you tagged, too, Seagrave."

Seagrave's smile was enigmatic. "People usually regard me as innocuous," he said. "Sometimes to their sorrow and destruction. . . ."

A week later Jim Hatfield and Lloyd Seagrave were riding up the valley of

the San Antonio River in a northwesterly direction, with a column of twelve men and six pack-mules behind them, along with a cavvy of thirty horses. The force was altogether too small for the task at hand, but it was composed of good experienced riders, well-armed, superbly mounted, and fully equipped for a long wilderness trek.

Bill McDowell had sent along another Ranger named Kennedy, and headquarters had dispatched for Seagrave a U.S. deputy marshal by the name of Hightower.

A gimp-legged former bronc-buster known as Brazos Barry was the wrangler in charge of the remuda. Killeen, a veteran muleskinner, handled the pack-train, and Baldy Fabian was the cook. In the ranks were Fox Edley, a reformed badman; Tip Scovel, drifting cowhand; Lukert, an erstwhile stagecoach guard; Whittaker, one-time frontier marshal; and a pair of gun-sharp idlers and floaters who were called Pinhead Poyner and Lefty Hitch.

Last but far from least was little Red Bouchard of the fiery hair and whiskers, whom Hatfield had come upon by chance in the Bella Union at San Antone. The same Red Bush, as the Indians called him, who had ridden the Oklahoma hills and plains with Jim Hatfield and his war party of Osage braves, and helped save the Amidon trail herd from Duke Vennis' renegade rustlers, on the old Chisholm Trail at the Cimarron River.

Bouchard had continued on with the trail drive to Abilene, when Hatfield had been forced to turn back to Texas and his duties as a Ranger. Over the whisky in celebration of their happy reunion, Red Bouchard reported that Amidon had made the deadline and had collected his bonus in Abilene. They had seen blonde Tess Hiller safely ensconced with her relatives in Kansas.

Bouchard had been eager to join this expedition to the San Saba, and Hatfield was more than pleased to have Red along with him. The little ex-hermit was a fine fighting man.

LEAVING the San Antonio Valley, the small cavalcade passed the headwaters of the Guadalupe and pushed on toward the Llano River, over a terrain that grew ever wilder and more primitive. The march was without notable incident so far. The men got along well together, the horses and mules held up strongly, and morale was high.

Back in San Antonio, the efforts of Hatfield and Seagrave to learn anything about Don Cristobal and his household had been abortive. After twice being refused entrance to the walled *hacienda,* they had procured a search warrant from the reluctant local authorities. But once inside the house, they had found no one home but the servants. Don Cristobal, his daughter, and his three attendants had gone to Mexico, they were informed, for an indefinite visit.

A search of the elaborate residence had disclosed nothing of interest or value to them. The flight to Mexico indicated involvement and guilt in the death of Vantine, and some link with the lost mine of the San Saba, but Hatfield and Seagrave had no time to press the investigation. Their order directed them to the head of the San Saba, to search for possible survivors of the Vantine party, and for the silver mine at the foot of Cerro del Almagre.

They had to learn what had happened to the original Government detail, and who had been responsible for their massacre. To bring to justice, one way or another, the men who had done wholesale slaughter.

In a country they had to assume was hostile, they progressed in military fashion under the direction of Jim Hatfield, with a point and flankers out, and a rear guard trailing the horse cavvy. Inquiries at the settlements and isolated ranches they passed brought no specific information concerning the fate of the Vantine detachment. Nothing but rumors of all sorts.

The Lipans were up, some told them, supported by the Wacos and Caddos and Tawakonis. Llano Estacado, the arid barren Staked Plains tableland of the north-

west, was overrun by murderous bands of white and Mexican outlaws. The army should be called out to protect the inhabitants of this remote area. But no one seemed to know anything definite.

They were crossing broad rolling scrub-wooded sage plains, with rocky ridges rising along either side, moving toward the oak and pecan bordered Ilano River, when gunfire broke out from behind and on the flanks.

Brazos Barry came up from the rear on a wounded laboring bronco, to report the approach of about ten riders from that direction. Ranger Kennedy rode in from the east with a similar story, and Tip Scovel galloped up from the western flank and announced an enemy force closing in there. The column was in danger of being trapped by a three-pronged attack!

Hatfield, ever on the alert for defensible positions along the way, had selected a strategic point in the easterly ridge where a small box canyon opened between brush-screened rock-tumbled slopes. Ordering the column forward on the double in a long northeasterly arc, Hatfield led them toward that canyon mouth in midday heat and dust. Kennedy, Hightower and Red Bouchard swung eastward to engage the flanking party there in a running fight and cover the movement of the main column.

Barry's wounded mustang gave out and had to be shot, and Brazos was sadly removing his saddle and bridle when Hatfield dropped back alongside him, having sent Scovel to rope another mount out of the remuda.

"Mill your horse herd when we get in close to the ridge, Brazos," said the Ranger. "Kick up all the dust you can, then drive 'em into that canyon and hold 'em there with the mules."

Barry rose with his saddle gear and a tobacco-twisted grin. "Don't I get to do any fighting at all here, Jim?" he drawled.

Hatfield smiled back at him. "It's only a shallow break in the wall, Brazos. Reckon you can get in a few shots from the mouth of it."

Hatfield put his big golden sorrel back to the head of the line, while Barry saddled and mounted his fresh horse and drifted back to the cavvy. On the right wing, Kennedy and Red Bouchard and Hightower had turned the attackers away under rapid withering Winchester fire, and Hatfield called them in as the point neared the eastern barrier.

Dust smoked yellow and dense, billowing high and clouding the brassy sunlight as Barry milled his horse herd briefly, before taking it into the box canyon after Killeen's mule train.

"Dismount — everybody down!" Hatfield called, swinging off Goldy and sending him in after the cavvy. "All horses inside there under cover."

THIS done immediately, he deployed his force into the brush and boulders of the slope at either side of the entrance, placing them at various levels to effect several layers of concentrated fire. Barry and Killeen roped their animals into the sheltered dead-end, and returned to the mouth with their carbines and six-guns. It was all accomplished with military speed and precision, and Lloyd Seagrave was plainly impressed.

"Hatfield, you did that as well as a good field officer could have, with a trained combat unit under him," Seagrave declared.

"I don't know about that," said Hatfield. "Common sense works pretty well in these matters."

Dust clouds were still hanging heavily in the sunshine when the three attacking forces met and hesitated out there in the bunchgrass and sagebrush of the prairie. On the hillside ahead of them, not a man nor a beast was visible, not a rifle-barrel reflected the sunlight.

There were about thirty of the enemy, Hatfield estimated quickly, but if they came in they'd have to come over more or less open terrain. In such a situation, with adequate cover and strategic placement, the advantage was with the defenders, even though they were outnumbered more than two-to-one.

Unable to see clearly through the dust

haze, the raiders apparently figured that the canyon penetrated all the way through the rough craggy height-of-land. Their quarry, they believed, had made it a corridor of retreat.

There were both Mexicans and Americans in the company, but none that Hatfield could recognize as yet. They spread out and moved forward in a wide skirmish line on the bronze-and-green plain, neither coming at the charge nor moving with wary caution. Just an unhurried general advance, their rifles across the saddlebows.

"Sure lucky we hit this spot," Hatfield thought thankfully, behind his slab of stone on the ridgeside. "Hope we can take some of 'em alive and find out who they're riding for—and why." Then, as they came closer and the air cleared somewhat, he muttered: "Well, now, I reckon they're riding for themselves."

For he had tentatively identified the two leaders in the center. The big powerful man in Mexican garb was an outlaw named Madera. The lean, lanky American was Hook Raskam. Two of the worst desperadoes of the Border.

Some of their followers were familiar to him, too. Sly oily Cervantes, bull-like Ortega among the dark-skinned horsemen; big, tough Rope Linchan, squat, ugly Hop Beagan, and the viperlike Snake Smallens with the whiter riders. All scum and rabble, the most vicious ruffians left along the Rio Grande and the Pecos River.

Then Madera must have seen something —the glint of gun steel or the movement of horses in the cleft of the ridge—for he raised a hand to halt the advance of his skirmishers and turned to say something to Hook Raskam. They were within long rifle-range, not as near as Hatfield wanted them, but someone at the bottom of the grade got over-anxious and opened fire.

Once that happened, there was no need of holding back on the part of the others. Hatfield laid his own sweaty cheek to the smooth stock, lined his sights, and squeezed off a shot at Madera. Tiers of rifle fire blasted out from the slopes on either side of the fissure.

The line of raiders was ripped into instant confusion and turmoil by that concerted blasting of high-powered guns, the horses rearing and pitching, the riders cringing low under the deadly lashing of lead. A pony plunged screaming to the reddish-brown earth here, a Mexican toppled into the sage there, and another man and mount fell thrashing in a clump of greasewood. The bandits returned the fire, but without much accuracy from their bucking horses, the bullets dusting the open slopes and richocheting among the rocks.

Jim Hatfield triggered and levered until his Winchester was spent, and by that time the enemy was in flight, pausing only long enough to gather up the unhorsed and wounded and dead. Riding double in some cases, while others carried corpses slung across their pommels, the outlaws were soon beyond range. Shortly they were out of sight on the broken wastelands.

Four dead horses were left behind on the sun-baked ground. Hatfield thought they had killed at least three of the attackers, and wounded three or four others. He turned to Seagrave, as both finished reloading their carbines.

"We know who we're fighting now anyway, Mr. Seagrave. The Madera-Raskam bunch, the toughest outfit on the border."

"They must know of that silver mine then," Seagrave said, fingering his neat mustache.

"Looks that way," said Hatfield. "Some reason they don't want any strangers riding around this part of Texas."

CHAPTER IV

Too Late!

WHEN the men were again mounted in formation and ready to resume the march, Hatfield wheeled his great golden sorrel at the head of the little column

"I don't know who fired that first shot, men," he said, "and I'm not trying to find out. It was an unfortunate mistake, however. If they'd come in close enough, we could have wiped out most of them. Taken some prisoners maybe, who could answer a lot of our questions. Well, it's too late for that now. I just hope it won't happen again."

Baldy Fabian, the cook, raised a raw plump hand. "I fired that shot, Jim. I wisht the muzzle had been in my big foolish mouth. It ain't ever going to happen again, Jim, but you can chew my ears off if you want to. Wouldn't blame you a damn bit!"

Hatfield smiled gently at the red-faced, mortified man. "Reckon you feel bad enough about it, Baldy," he said. "And I'm always careful how I talk to a cook."

Everybody laughed, and Baldy grinned sheepishly. "I'm sure much obliged, Jim. And I sure won't go off half-cocked again."

"You certainly know how to handle men, Ranger," said Seagrave, as they strung out across the sun-bright prairie.

"I've got a friend there now, Mr. Seagrave," Jim Hatfield said simply. "I could have made an enemy for life, if I'd blistered his ears in front of the whole crew."

Seagrave smiled, his respect and liking for Hatfield growing by the hour. "And we'll eat a lot better too," he said. "Thanks to your discretion and reserve."

In the ranks they were discussing Hatfield's leadership. "A damn good man to ride behind," said Pinhead Poyner with emphasis. "I never had any too much use for lawmen myself, but I sure got to hand it to this Jim Hatfield."

"I always hated badge-wearers, even since I turned straight and honest," Fox Edley declared. "But not Hatfield. I'd foller Jim from hell to hallelujah!"

Red Bouchard nodded, smiled, and spat tobacco juice through his fiery red whiskers. "Jim Hatfield can lead any kind of a fighting outfit, from wild Osage bucks to U.S. regulars," he said. "And any real fighting man would be mighty proud and happy to follow the Lone Wolf."

Up front, Lloyd Seagrave said, "You ever hear of a place called Caddos Corner, Hatfield?"

"Next town we hit," Hatfield told him. "At the fork of the Llano."

"Poor old Vantine tried to tell me something about Caddos Corner just before he died," Seagrave said. "But he was unintelligible by that time. I couldn't get it at all. Nothing but the name of the settlement, and Professor Wilkins' name. Thought he might mean that Wilkins died there, but it was all jumbled up."

Caddos Corner, a rude cluster of ramshackle frame and log houses and ugly adobes, had grown up around the Caddos Indian Agency at the fork of the Llano River. It was decided to camp in an oak and pecan grove on the lower branch of the stream southwest of town, and await darkness before venturing in to scout the community. For all they knew, it might be a headquarters for the Madera-Raskam gang.

Hatfield decided to visit the settlement himself, and Seagrave wanted to go with him. Because Vantine had mentioned Caddos, it took on importance in Seagrave's mind, and he believed they'd discover something there. Seagrave had one of his famed hunches, which had contributed toward making him such an outstanding Pinkerton agent, and now an excellent Chief of United States Marshals.

They decided they would enter the town together, with Red Bouchard and Whittaker trailing along to cover them. Ranger Kennedy and Marshal Hightower, left in command at the bivouac, would be ready to move into Caddos if any shooting broke out there. Or if the first four invaders did not return within an hour.

In the early darkness, Hatfield stepped into the saddle on Goldy, Seagrave swung aboard his favorite gray gelding, and they started along the South Fork toward the lights of the settlement. Little Red Bouchard and gaunt, gray-mustached Whittaker mounted and rode after them. The remaining men settled down to rest and wait, smoking or chewing, and conversing in low tones. Lookouts had been posted

and horses saddled and ready to go.

Brazos Barry and Killeen had the spare mounts and mules hobbled and secure in a rope corral under the trees. Baldy Fabian was brewing a fresh pot of coffee over the stone-screened firepit.

CADDOS CORNER was in reality a triangle, occupying a wedge-shaped bluff in the fork of the tributaries, which had cut rather deeply into the bedrock at this point. Hatfield and Seagrave slid their horses down an embankment, forded the shallows in the lower branch, and climbed steeply to the level of the town on the bluff.

The two-story adobe that had once housed the Indian agency was now a general store, barroom and hotel. In the center of the community, it was a natural gathering place. Hatfield and Seagrave tethered their mounts at the rear, and sauntered around to the front.

Bouchard and Whittaker had continued in along the southern fork, to cross the bridge and enter on the wagon road near the point of the triangle.

Seeing none of the renegade Americano or Mexicano, who rode with Hook Raskam and Madera among the loafers under the ramada of the large adobe structure, Hatfield and Seagrave pushed through into the saloon. A small lobby and stairway separated the barroom from the store in the right wing of the building. Men were drinking at the bar, while their wives did their buying.

The two strangers tossed off a drink, and moved into the lobby. A swarthy pock-marked man of middle age and size was smoking a fat cigar behind the desk. He admitted being the proprietor, name of Sam Dingel. He was voluble for this country, and not averse to chatting.

Lloyd Seagrave did most of the talking here, and Hatfield admired the way he maneuvered the conversation into the desired channels. The Lipans, outlaws of the Pecos and Rio Grande, a lost silver mine on the San Saba, a recent expedition that had vanished mysteriously in this wilderness.

Finally Dingel was beginning to grow uneasy and evasive, in spite of Seagrave's cleverness. But his prominent eyes were an admission of some secret knowledge.

"We are searching for survivors of that ill-fated expedition," Seagrave said.

Dingel nodded wisely, hooding his eyes with dark lids. "There's been others looking for 'em too, mister. Plumb anxious to locate 'em."

"Is that so? What sort of looking men were they?"

"Rough," said Dingel. "A good deal rougher'n you two. Men with mixed blood and wetbacks from the Rio Grande, they looked like to me."

Seagrave elected to play it straight and bold. "Bandits," he said, with mild derision. "But we represent the government, Dingel. This gentleman, the State of Texas. Myself, the United States. Our authority is virtually unlimited in this affair."

He had gauged his man correctly. Sam Dingel was obviously awed, and more than a little frightened, his popeyes swerving from the small Seagrave to big rangy Hatfield. Dingel might scorn local law, but he wasn't a man to flout Federal power, or even the state.

"You been here before, friend?" he mumbled at Hatfield.

The Ranger nodded solemnly from his towering height. "Reckon you're hiding something from us," he drawled, falling into frontier vernacular. "Sure hope you ain't going to make us pry it out of you, pardner."

Dingel, eyes bulging more than ever, scurried about the place. Raising his voice and lifting a large key off the rack, he said: "This way, gentlemen. I'll show you up to your room right away."

They followed him up the creaking stairs, and Dingel paused halfway along the empty dimness of the corridor.

"Lied to them others till I was blue in the face," he said cautiously. "Sick and tired of this business. Prove you're Government men and I'll give you what I know." He peered at Seagrave. "You look like the man I was told to watch for, mister."

Seagrave produced his gold badge, Hatfield his silver star, and Dingel went on: "I've had this poor feller here for weeks and weeks. He 'most died and he ain't far from death right now. Them others wanted to kill him, but I got an idea you want to save him. He ain't going to be much good to the Government or anybody else, but I'm real glad you came after him. Been afraid they'd bust in and shoot him in bed."

"You mean Madera and Raskam and them gunnies?" asked Hatfield.

"I ain't naming no names," Dingel said, but his bald head was moving up and down in the affirmative. He opened a door at the rear of the hallway, lighted a lamp within the room, and swore with sudden profane horror.

"Too late, too late! Godlemighty, they must of got in here tonight. But I didn't tell 'em, I never let on he was here!"

At his shoulder, Seagrave said: "*Wilkins!* Wilkins, too."

HATFIELD and Seagrave pushed past and stood beside the bed. It wasn't a pleasant picture. The man's skull had been crushed in, his cadaverous features were blood encrusted, his scrawny, wasted form twisted and stark. His right arm ended in a bandaged stump above the elbow. His left hand was fingerless and

A TALL TEXAS TALE

MAGIC MOLASSES

TROUBLE MALONE grimaced when I showed him the medicine. He was from California and the medicine was bottled in Texas. "That's no good for my sciatica. Evergood's Ever-Well. Ugh! Prob'ly come out of some oil well."

"Matter of fact, Trouble," I says, "that medicine did come out of a oil well, and it saved a man's life once, and made millionaires out of 25 lazy men."

He looked at me then like he didn't believe what I said, so I explained:

"Down in the Panhandle thirty year ago, used to be a medicine man name of Silas Evergood. Big Doc, folks called him, though he wasn't no more doctor than you or me. It was him mixed the medicine and sold it as a cure for Athlete's Foot, Nightmare and Harelip. All he'd put into it was petroleum jelly and molasses. But blamed if it didn't up and grow a new leg on one of them veterans of the Spanish-American War. I saw it cure a bad case of St. Vitus' Dance once. The molasses in the medicine slowed up the jig to a shuffle and the patient was grateful for life."

"Get to the point, Truthful," Trouble said. "I'd like to know how this here stuff saved a man's life and made millionaires out of 25 lazy men."

"Well, Trouble," I continued, "the Medical Commission in Austin started complainin' about malpractice, and soon posses in every county began closin' in on the Doc. One posse, collected from a ranch near the Rio Grande, caught sight of Doc's medicine wagon movin' toward the border. The Doc saw they were gainin' on him, so he started to unload his bottles, spillin' them out in back of him. Some of the bottles broke and the molasses poured out along the trail. The horses that'd been gaining began to skid and lose their footing till the posse had to call it quits. So the man whose life was saved was the man who invented the medicine, Doc Evergood hisself."

"What about the part where 25 lazy men became millionaires?" Trouble asked.

"Well, like I said before, Trouble, them bottles that poured out on the trail had petroleum jelly in them. The petroleum jelly soaked into the ground where the men was flounderin' in molasses. As a result, that area became one of the richest oil sources in the whole country. That posse numbered 25 men, all recruited from the Lazy H ranch near the Rio Grande. Those 25 men staked out claims on that land where that whole medicine wagon full of molasses and petroleum jelly had poured out. And that's how 25 lazy men became millionaires. Where you headed for, Trouble?"

But he was out the door and gone. Back to California, most likely.

—*Nat Weinberg*

mutilated. But those were old wounds. Only the head and facial injuries were fresh—and fatal. Professor Wilkins had gone to join his distinguished colleague, Dr. Vantine.

"He have anything with him?" demanded Hatfield.

"Nothing," Dingel said dully. "Nothing but the rags on his back."

"What did he tell you?" asked Seagrave.

"Not much. They tortured him and cut off his arm and fingers, trying to make him tell about that silver mine. He—he was a little crazy maybe. Said he never found any mine. Said all his friends were dead, excepting maybe the old guide and a Ranger. And they probably wisht they was dead."

Seagrave studied the window and porch roof. Hatfield straightened from a gruesome examination of the skull wounds.

"Done within the hour, Seagrave," he said miserably. "If we'd come straight in, we'd have been in time."

"We had no way of knowing that, Hatfield," Seagrave said comfortingly. He turned to Dingel. "Is there an undertaker here? Send for him at once, and the doctor too, I suppose. We want Professor Wilkins buried here, temporarily at least.—Let's get out of this charnel-house now, Ranger."

When they left Dingel in the lobby downstairs, he looked at them with agonized eyes. "They're liable to come back and kill me for lying to 'em," he muttered.

"I doubt it, Dingel," said Seagrave. "They got the man they wanted—before he could talk to us. We'll be around a while anyway. Until the doctor and undertaker arrive."

They had another quick drink at the bar, to clear their heads of the sight and smell of that upstairs bedroom, then carried a bottle and glasses to a table, which commanded a view of the lobby and store as well as the saloon. Seagrave lit a cheroot while Hatfield made a cigarette, and they sat smoking and nursing their drinks in morbid, thoughtful silence.

Glimpsing two dark-clothed men entering the lobby from the store side, partially screened by housewives coming through to call their husbands away from the bar, Hatfield surmised that the doctor and undertaker had come.

He and Seagrave were rising from the table when a woman's shrill scream split the smoky air. Sam Dingel's hoarse voice shouted in terrified protest:

"No! For God sake, *don't!"*

Then gun blasts filled the small lobby with flame and roaring sound.

CHAPTER V

Crossfire at Caddos

JIM HATFIELD, blocked momentarily by a tide of horrified, screeching women, broke through into the lobby a long stride ahead of Lloyd Seagrave. Two black-garbed figures wheeled away from the desk, guns already drawn and coming to bear, and Hatfield recognized the froglike Hop Beagan and reptilian Snake Smallens, as he lunged toward them, the big Colt leaping up and flaring brightly in his whipping right hand.

Gunfire stabbed at him and lead fanned hot and close, flaking shreds from the doorway and shattering glassware in the background. But Hatfield had hammered his first shot home, dead-center, and Hop Beagan was gutshot and sinking floorward, clawing spasmodically at his torn abdomen as he pitched forward snarling at the Ranger's feet.

Hatfield tripped over the hunched, writhing body, just as Snake Smallens' pistol blazed at him again. But Hatfield was sliding on his chest and the bullet passed over him and showered adobe from the wall.

Before Smallens could twitch and trigger again, Seagrave had slammed two .41 slugs into him from the short-barreled belly gun in his waistband. Smashed backward by the two hammerlike impacts, Snake Smallens crumpled against the ban-

ister of the staircase, fired involuntarily into the floor, and was keeling forward when Seagrave shot him through once more. Squirming like his namesake, Smallens clutched at the railing, slid to his knees, and lurched backward to lie with his evil head near the spurred boots of Beagan.

Hatfield was up like a big cat, both guns ready now, stormy gray eyes slitted against the powdersmoke as he swept the reeking rooms for more enemies. But there didn't seem to be any.

Hatfield sighed and turned to look over the counter. Sam Dingel was huddled at the inner base of it, as dead as the two men sprawled in front of the desk. Hatfield and Seagrave looked at one another and shook their heads in slow sorrow. It was a shame, after all Dingel had done for Wilkins. Hatfield blamed himself for not staying at the hotel proprietor's side.

The doctor and undertaker arrived as Hatfield and Seagrave reloaded their handguns, and just before Mrs. Dingel burst out of the kitchen and hurled herself down upon her husband's body. Seagrave made arrangements for Professor Wilkins, and paid the funeral expenses of Dingel as well as the scientist.

"The least the Government can do," Seagrave said, gravely, and then his voice sharpened as he indicated Beagan and Smallens with the toe of his boot. "What you do with those two mad dogs doesn't matter in the least, gentlemen!"

Hatfield and Seagrave were at the swing-doors and about to emerge under the ramada of the old agency, when Red Bouchard's shout reached them:

"Duck back, boys! Hang inside for a minute!"

They pulled away from the batwings and waited, guns in hand, until reports crashed and echoed in the street outside. They went out on the run then, but the shooting was over as quickly as it started.

Hatfield was relieved to see Red Bouchard standing out there, his carbine smoking in the crook of his elbow, his eyes on the Mexican who was down on all fours in the gutter, coughing and gagging his life out into the dirt. And the gaunt, stooped figure of Whittaker, Colts poised in either hand, a grim smile of satisfaction under his gray mustache, as another Mexican at the other end of the adobe stopped kicking and stretched motionless in the dust.

"That's all of 'em Jim," announced Bouchard cheerfully. "Taking it for granted that you got them two varmints that slunk inside. The town's ours, I reckon. And Whit and me has worked up a powerful thirst out here."

"Step right in to the barroom and order up, boys," Hatfield said. "Marshal Seagrave and I'll take the outside and give you you're turn at the refreshments. Might as well wait here until the boys come in from the South Fork."

HE COULDN'T identify either of the dead Mexicans before the adobe building, but that didn't matter much. They belonged to the Madera-Raskam bunch, and it meant two less to be faced and killed in the future.

"If we keep on whittling them down," Hatfield thought, "they won't be terrorizing this country much longer. Beagan and Smallens were two of the worst. But there are still plenty of bad ones left. And we still haven't found out anything much about the Vantine project and the Cerro del Almagre Mine."

And then, oddly enough, to Hatfield's mind came thoughts of the Cristobals. The vivid beauty of Dolores, the courtly arrogance of her father. The diabolically handsome Castro, surly brutal Guerra, and Juanillo, the laughing killer.

Why had they fled to Mexico? How were they tied up with these frontier ruffians and the lost silver mine, and the ruthless slaughter of Federal expedition personnel headed by top American scientists? There was no answer. Hatfield tried to excise the matter from his troubled mind.

The Ranger and the Chief Marshal from Washington stood watch until the main body of their men rode into town, waited while all the boys took their pleasure at

the bar, and then led the detail back to camp on the South Fork.

In the morning they forded the stream and struck northwest toward the upper branch of the Llano. Beyond that were the headwaters of the San Saba.

The plains along the upper reaches of the North Fork were clothed sparsely with scrub oak, cedar and jack pine, humped with blunt hillocks and crooked ridges, cut with sharp gullies and shallow dry washes. The column was following a rutted wagon road, showing traces of recent traffic, when Lukert dropped back from the point and reported a small Mexican wagon and pack-train ahead.

"Don't look like much, Jim," said the former shotgun guard of the Butterfield stage line. "Four old busted-down wagons and half a dozen pack-mules. Two Mexes on each cart, two riders with the mules, and no mounted escort. It don't look like a fighting outfit, but it's hard to tell about them Mexicans."

"Right, Luke," said Hatfield. "There could be riflemen in the wagons, or escort riders hanging out in the woods. If they're freighting this country without escort, they're either working for the bandits or just plain ignorant. We'll push along and have a look at 'em."

With flankers out scouting the terrain ahead, Hatfield brought his detail up on the rear of the wagon train. The scouts returned with an all-clear report, and the column closed in on the freighters.

The Mexicans, regarding them with total indifference and unconcern, kept their teams and mules plodding along at the same stolid pace. The ragged hooded vehicles, blanket-draped at the rear, revealed nothing of their contents. The great raw-hide *aparejos* on the mules were equally unrevealing as to cargo. The Mexicans themselves were poorly dressed, poorly armed, stoical to the point of stupidity, on the surface, at least. But it was never safe to take these people at their face value.

Jim Hatfield, a tall, imposing figure on his big sorrel, attempted to engage the driver of the lead wagon in conversation. The man, short and fat, with a plump fleshy face under his steeple sombrero, said his name was Miguel, and that they were carrying provisions to the Lipan Indians.

"Agency stuff?" asked Hatfield, trying to catch him in a lie.

"No agency. We deal with Lipans." Truthful, so far.

"What you got for them?"

"Same as usual," Miguel said, shrugging. "Some beef and blankets. Plenty of junk and trinkets."

"A little whisky maybe?" teased Hatfield, with a knowing man-to-man grin.

"No whisky. Whisky bad for Indians, senor." Miguel was pained—and lying now. The effort beaded his swarthy face with perspiration.

Hatfield nodded agreeably. "A few rifles perhaps? A few boxes of ammunition?"

"No guns, no bullets!" Miguel was indignant, his full lips pouted. He was sweating more profusely than ever.

"They pay you in silver?" Hatfield went on relentlessly.

"Silver? Mother of God!" The fat Mexican gestured hopelessly. "Whoever heard of Indians with silver? We don't get rich here, senor. We take hides and pelts, Indian rugs, blankets, baskets. Sometimes wild ponies."

"A long way to come for a small profit," Hatfield said, shaking his head, as if in sympathy. Then his lean jaws and face hardened, the sunny green eyes turned to cold gray steel. "You're a liar, Miguel. We'll take a look at your wagons and kyacks."

MIGUEL'S eyes rolled white in alarm. "You have no right, senor!"

"I have the right. I'm Jim Hatfield of the Rangers."

Miguel inclined his oversized head. "I know you, Senor Hatfield. Why does the Lone Wolf pick on a poor hard-working trader?"

"Pull, up, stop the wagons," Hatfield ordered, turning in his saddle and addressing Ranger Kennedy. "Ken, pass the word to inspect these loads and take the lead

wagon yourself. Keep the men covered."

Hatfield drifted back along the line with watchful eyes, and reined Goldy up beside the pack-train. Lifting his Winchester from its scabbard, he swung the steel-shod butt at the bulky pannier on the lead mule. Glass splintered under the stroke, and the raw smell of cheap rotgut whisky rose in the sunlit air. The mule bucked a bit, the bell jangling on its neck.

Hatfield wheeled back toward the head of the train, booting his carbine as he rode.

Kennedy's square-jawed brown face appeared above the tail-gate of the lead wagon. "Henry rifles and forty-four-forty shells, Jim," he said.

"Sure, Ken," drawled Hatfield. "No wonder the Lipans are up, with Raskam and Madera freighting whisky and guns in to them. This business gets a little rottener all the time." He kneed Goldy on to the box of the front vehicle, and lined his Colt at the two men seated there. "No whisky and no rifles, huh, Miguel? Snub the reins and get down off there. Or reach for a gun, if you'd rather."

Spreading their palms and wagging their heads, the Mexicans started clambering out of the seat. And at that moment hoarse cries arose from the outriders on either side of the road.

"Injuns coming!" Red Bouchard yelled from the left flank. "Hell's own horde of 'em!" And on the other wing, Lefty Hitch bawled: "More Indians coming this way! Fort up and get ready to fight, men!"

Hatfield's head jerked around without volition, at the first warning outcry, and fat Miguel heaved back onto the wagon box and grabbed at his holster. The pistol was half-drawn when Hatfield swiveled in the saddle and fired across his body, the muzzle-light flickering palely in the glaring sunshine. Miguel, pawing flabbily at his wide, heavy breast, screamed like a woman and floundered out over the wheel to the roadside dirt.

The other Mexican's barrel was clear and rising into line, but Jim Hatfield swerved his Colt slightly and let the hammer fall again. The .45 slug slashed the man into a backward roll on the seat and off, to hang across the far wheel for an instant, before plunging headfirst into the ditch.

Back along the line most of the Mexicans had surrendered, belts dropped and hands high overhead, but a few of them chose to fight or run for it in the chaotic confusion. These were promptly shot down, tumbling off their wagons or sprawling in the underbrush.

The mounted mule-skinners made a break for it, but Baldy Fabian blew one of them out of the saddle, and Killeen blasted the other one, mule and all, into a threshing tangle. Then, with Fox Edley and Brazos Barry, they set to shooting down the pack-mules and forming an erratic barrier of mulemeat and loaded rawhide sacks.

Hatfield caught the reins of the lead wagon team, and led the horses around in a tight half-circle, halting them opposite the rear vehicle. Knife in hand, the Ranger swung down and slashed the four animals free of the traces, sending them off in panicked flight.

Kennedy did the same with the second wagon, pulling it around opposite the third cart and cutting the team loose from the harness. The other draft horses freed and driven away, the riders crowded into the crude open square formed by the four wagons, tying their mounts and unlimbering their carbines.

One end of the improvised fortress was barricaded with dead mules, but the other was wide open.

CHAPTER VI

The Lipans Come

BOUCHARD and Lefty Hitch and Tip Scovel came hurtling in from their outpost positions, empty guns smoking in their hands, sweaty faces streaked with powder. The Indians were coming from all sides, yapping like wild dogs and racing

their fleet ponies through the trees and brush, pouring gunfire into the square of wagons.

Lipans, painted yellow and vermilion for war, coppery torsos naked to breechclouts, howling and charging like suicidal maniacs into that blazing ring of American rifle fire. Spotted ponies and muscular brown bodies thrashed rolling to earth, but the warriors came on over their dead. "Drunk," thought Hatfield bitterly. "Full of white man's firewater and crazed for slaughter."

In the smoke and dust of the wagon square, men were firing from beneath the vehicles and behind wheels, from canvas-hooded bodies and from behind a mound of dead mules, from the bullet-scourged open end of the horseshoe-shaped barrier. The horse herd had been driven off by the raiders, but saddled mounts were within the defense lines, and some of them had taken bullets and were down, kicking and trumpeting in agony.

And men were hit too, faces sunken and twisted from the shock of lead, but still firing and fighting back as long as they could hold and trigger a gun.

Jim Hatfield crouched by a wheel at the open side of the defenses, hammering away with his Winchester until it was spent, then going to his Colt handguns as the maddened Lipans drove within revolver range. At the wheel across from the Ranger, little Lloyd Seagrave stood erect and emptied his pistols, before taking up the carbine.

Dust and smoke dimmed the sunlight, and the murky air was slashed with lightning-like flashes, laced everywhere with searching slugs of death. Bullets beat up the dirt and splintered wood, shredded canvas, and ripped sparks from iron-tired wheels, smashed into dead and living flesh.

But the Lipans were turned and driven back at last with dreadful losses, leaving dead and dying ponies and braves strewn all around the full circle, some of them downed within twenty feet of the battered wagons. They withdrew in fury, screeching defiance, reluctant to abandon their dead, still drunk on alcohol and blood. Hatfield knew they'd be back again.

The reek of whisky from the riddled pack-sacks mingled with the pungent dust and acrid powder fumes. The men in that embattled square were sweat-soaked and powder-blackened, spattered with the blood of horses and humans, in some instances drenched in their own.

Jim Hatfield rinsed his mouth and drank sparingly from his canteen, and turned somberly to check on the casualties. Three horses were lifeless, and Tip Scovel was grimly preparing to shoot his broken-legged bay. Hatfield noted with relief that Goldy was alive and unhurt. Pinhead Poyner had a bullet-hole in his shoulder, high enough to be safe, and Killeen had a raggedly gouged thigh, painful but not dangerous.

Lefty Hitch wore a bloody mask from his furrowed scalp, and Hightower had lost the upper rim of his right ear. Kennedy's side was bleeding from a shallow groove, and Fox Edley had a shot-seared neck. Red Bouchard's shoulder was nicked, and Brazos Barry had lost some flesh from his bad leg. None of these was serious, however, Poyner and Killeen being the hardest hit—except for the dead.

Lukert, ex-shotgun guard for the Butterfield stages, was slumped over his rifle beneath one of the wagons, shot through the head and chest. And Whittaker, former marshal of frontier towns, lay dead in the rear of a wagon body, his gray head drooping over the tailgate, his gray mustache crimsoned darkly.

"Two of them," Hatfield thought, in cold anger. "Two good men. Killed by savages, drunk on white men's liquor and armed with American weapons. But there might have been a lot more. There may be yet."

"Will they hit us again, Hatfield?" asked Lloyd Seagrave calmly. "They took a tremendous beating that time."

"Reckon they'll try it again, Marshal," said Hatfield, busy over the wound in Pinhead Poyner's shoulder.

"They're either drunk or crazy then," Seagrave said.

"Both," said Hatfield, with a wry grin.

"And it all goes back to Madera and Raskam."

"This expedition is badly crippled," said Seagrave, lighting one of his thin cigars. "Two men killed, most of the others wounded, the remuda and pack-train gone. But we can go on, I imagine—providing we get out of here."

"We'll get out—and go on," Hatfield said quietly. "One more charge, and they won't have enough braves left to hit us or hold us here."

SEAGRAVE nodded and smiled back at him. "Perhaps we should drink some of that mule-train liquor, Jim. Loaded with that, a man doesn't seem to care whether he lives or dies."

Hatfield smiled. "After swilling enough of that stuff, Seagrave, death might be preferable. It takes an Indian stomach to stand it. But it's all right to wash out wounds with. Isn't it, Pinhead?"

"Yeah, sure," groaned Poyner. "It's like acid, that's all. But I'm going to sample some of it, Jim. Can't hurt my belly any more'n it hurt that bullet-hole." He tilted the bottle that Hatfield had taken from the pack-mules to use as an antiseptic. "Ain't too bad."

Finished with Poyner, Hatfield turned to cleanse and dress Killeen's thigh. Killeen grabbed for the whisky. "I'll take mine this way first, Jim." Hatfield nodded, grinning. "Why not, Killy? It ought to make a good anesthetic."

He was bandaging Killeen's leg, when Red Bouchard announced with moderate disgust:

"Damned if they ain't coming back for more, boys. Must be that whisky smell that draws 'em, or else they're just hogs for punishment."

The Lipans circled and closed in gradually, then came at the wagons with a rush, but this attack lacked the sheer ferocity and insane daring of the first. Wicked rifle fire mowed down the front line of raiders, all around the compass, and the

[*Turn page*]

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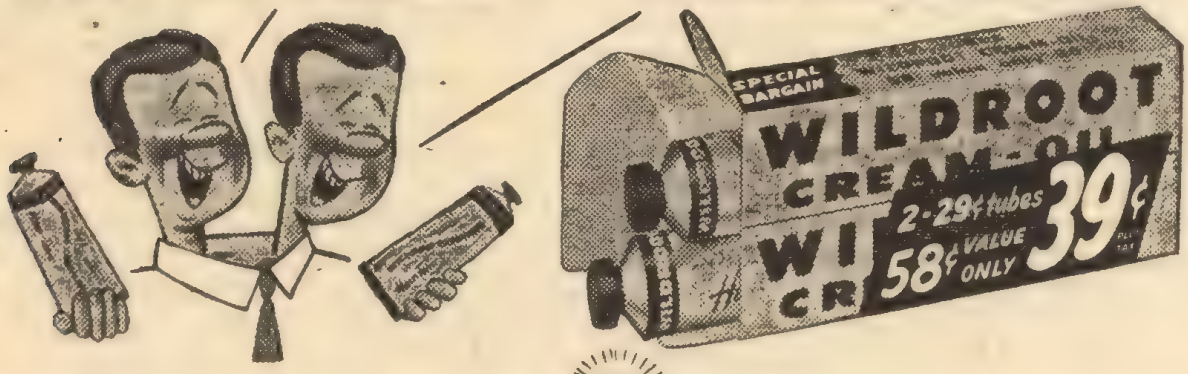

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following horsemen faltered and broke, their dead piled two-deep in places before them.

More pintos and warriors dropped under that scything fire, and the rest scattered in full frantic flight through the sage, creosote brush and trees, fleeting from view in the blackjack and cedar groves beyond.

Both Hatfield and Seagrave had bullet tears in their hats and clothing, but there had been no further casualties among the men in the square of wagons, except that one of the Mex prisoners was killed in this final action.

"They won't come back again, now," Jim Hatfield said. "They're licked for good this time, boys."

He sent Barry and Scovel out to scout for horses and mules, and detailed others to dig graves for Whittaker and Lukert, and to rig travois for Poyner and Killeen.

He, Seagrave and a few more ransacked the Mexican wagons and dead mules for supplies that would be useful to them. They found a good quantity of foodstuffs, some whisky of better grade, and helped themselves to brand-new Henry repeaters, ammunition, blankets and other materials.

It was a shame to burn the bulk of the rifles and cartridges, but it had to be done in order to prevent them from falling into hostile Indian hands.

Barry and Scovel came back with several horses from the scattered cavvy, and a couple of runaway pack-mules. When the column was finally ready to move out, they poured kerosene from the supplies over the four wagons and set fire to them, leaving the Mexican survivors behind to watch the conflagration.

Twelve men instead of fourteen, and two of them being dragged in travois instead of sitting their saddles, they pushed on past the head of the North Fork of the Llano, and into the northwest toward the San Saba River, about fifty miles distant now.

Small as the party was, it had administered a severe whipping to the Border bandits, had shot down four more of them at Caddos Corner, and had inflicted a crushing defeat on the Lipans today. Both the outlaws and Indians would think twice before striking them in the open again, Hatfield reflected, the odds notwithstanding.

But looking at it in the cold light of facts and figures, they were hopelessly outnumbered in a strange and hostile wilderness.

Traveling slowly on account of the wounded, it required three days to cross that bleak tableland between the two river systems, a march that could have been made in a day under ordinary circumstances. By that time all the minor wounds were healed, and even Poyner and Killeen had recovered sufficiently to rise from their travois beds and mount horses again.

There were no incidents on that semi-arid plateau, studded with angular buttes and mesas of red ochre stone, and with pitahaya columns of grotesque design. Cactus flourished here, the spread-armed sahuaro, the recumbent barrel, and brilliant blooming staghorn. There was waxy-leafed mesquite with white-starred mescal, needle-spined chollas, barbed catclaw, and white-blossomed Spanish bayonet.

THE THIRD afternoon they dropped from the desertlike tabletop toward the still-distant greenery of the San Saba River, and were winding over a dry uneven terrain of sandy hills and sharp arroyos when the sound of gunfire came on the furnace-breath of the breeze. It sounded like a large-scale battle taking place beyond the next barren razor-backed divide.

Skirting to a point where the height of land was marked with chaparral, greasewood shrubs and tall bladed yucca, Jim Hatfield dismounted his column below the rim. He moved forward on foot to the crest.

On the sweeping broken plain below, threaded by a creek that meandered along through a broad shallow gorge, a lonely ranch layout was encircled and besieged by a considerable force. Where only three or four guns spoke from the cluster of ranch buildings, a score or more rifles in a

vast circle were sniping away at the spread.

Jim Hatfield focused his binoculars on the scene, and Lloyd Seagrave uncased his own fieldglasses. There were dead horses and men in the ranchyard, already bloating and fly-swarmed in the sunlight. Four defenders left, Hatfield perceived, one firing from the frame barn, another from a row of rickety sheds. Two riflemen were in the adobe ranchhouse. It was clearly just a matter of time for them.

Hatfield shifted his attention to the attacking force, running down one patch of gunsmoke after another. Some of the raiders were well-concealed, even from this elevation, but others could be plainly seen in the lenses. Mexicans with peaked sombrerors and conchaed jackets, flaring pants and fancy boots and spurs. Texans in flat-crowned wide-brimmed hats, jumpers and jackets or leather vests, blue jeans or checked California trousers.

The Madera-Raskam outfit, without a doubt. But why were they laying siege to this isolated, rundown ranch? Hatfield could think of but one explanation, and he glanced at Seagrave.

"We might have some friends penned up down there, Marshal," he said tightly.

"I thought of that," said Seagrave. "If Gergen's still alive, or those two men of yours— Perhaps they trailed them to this ranch."

"Travers and Bostater," Hatfield said musingly, visualizing the lanky blond Ranger with his boyish grin, and the wizened old plainsman, Bo, grumpy and grizzled. Somehow he had pictured them as alive, all the way up here, finding it difficult to conceive of them as dead. They had lived through too much, both of them, to die in a Government-sponsored treasure hunt that Hatfield was coming to regard as a complete farce and a folly.

"It's a long shot and in the dark though," Seagrave said. "Maybe the owlhoots just want to take over this ranch. Or possibly they're just shooting it up to keep in practice. They no doubt kill for the sake of killing."

"What's your hunch say, Marshal?" asked the Ranger.

"Whoever's down there needs help. It doesn't take any hunch to tell me we're going to give it to them."

Hatfield smiled at him warmly. "Good boy! If we had twenty men, it'd be fairly simple. Or if we could afford to wait until night— But we have to do it with what we've got, and as soon as possible."

He spoke as if to himself, studying the terrain through his glasses. There was the river gorge for one approach, and numerous dry washes and ravines for others, but you couldn't split up twelve men in too many ways. When you were that shorthanded it was risky to split at all.

Seagrave scratched his mustache and eyed the Ranger with friendly malice. "Your defensive tactics have been splendid, Hatfield. Let's see how you are on the offensive side."

Hatfield smiled with good humor. "I generally prefer the offense. But this is going to take some doing, and that's for sure."

"Well, you've got ten men who will follow you barefooted into hell's deepest pit," Seagrave said. "Eleven, I mean, counting myself."

"That's a fine thing to know," Hatfield said gravely. "It also makes a man feel kind of humble and undeserving."

"Yes, I understand, Hatfield," said Seagrave. "You're one of the few men I've ever known without conceit."

CHAPTER VII

Ranch-house Assault

VAGUELY embarrased, but warmed, Hatfield went on sweeping the reddish-brown and greenish-bronze landscape with his field-glasses. The rifle in the sheds ceased firing all at once then. The two men waited and watched, but it did not resume the fire. Three defenders left, and the man in the barn was apt to get it any minute.

"Reckon that means us," Hatfield said softly. "Into the valley of death—Marshal, I'd like you to take five men down through those woods and drop into the river gorge. Work along it toward the ranch and clean up those four or five snipers on the way. I'll swing around to the west and come in on top of the outlaws in that far gully with our other five. Any questions?"

Seagrave shook his brown head. "I guess not. We rendezvous at the ranch?" It was a half-question.

"If we get in that far," Hatfield said. "Otherwise back here where we started. Have to leave the extra horses and mules here anyway."

They pushed back, slid down from the rimrock, and descended to the waiting men and animals. It looked like a pitifully small group for the job ahead. Hatfield and Seagrave explained the situation, and went about dividing their forces into two parties. Seagrave was taking Hightower, Barry, Killeen, Scovel and Baldy Fabian—Hatfield had Kennedy, Elley, Poyner, Hitch and Red Bouchard. Hobbling and tethering the remaining horses and mules, they set out in the lee of the divide, Seagrave's detachment diverging into trees, Hatfield's detail carrying on to the westward.

Hatfield drifted Goldy back alongside of Poyner. "When we strike, Pinhead, I want you to hang back and cover us. I don't want you to do any hard riding, with that shoulder."

Poyner grinned a homely, buck-toothed grin. "What if my horse runs away with me, Jim? Can't blame me if he takes off after the others."

Hatfield's attempted scowl turned into a grimacing smile, despite himself. "Maybe you want to open that wound and bleed to death, Pinhead?"

Poyner made a wry face. "They always said there was bad blood in me, Jim. Maybe wouldn't do no harm to let some more of it out."

From the crest they descended in a wide arc, utilizing a screen of tarragon and spiky-boughed ironwood trees, an undergrowth of nopal and golden gillia.

By the time Hatfield's flankers were in position on the west, the mid-afternoon sun hot on their sweat-plastered backs, the rifle in the barn was no longer active. With but two men left to hold the adobe ranchhouse, the assault force was mounting and emerging from shelter to close in on the layout. The impromptu timing of events couldn't have been more favorable to Hatfield and Seagrave and the men they were leading.

It was like shooting fish in a barrel, those first volleys. On the eastern flats, the five snipers had mounted and climbed from the creek bed, presenting high broad-backed targets to Seagrave and his crew, as they moved in along the shallow gorge. At Seagrave's signal, six carbines crashed aflame from the river bank, cutting down outlaws and horses in a bloody tangled welter. The boiling dust was pierced by the dying shrieks of men and beasts, much alike in the final agonies.

On the western slope the six bandits were wider spaced and at greater range, and the first blast from Hatfield's party was somewhat less effective than Seagrave's had been. But two raiders were knocked from their saddles and the mount of a third sent cartwheeling.

The rider started shooting from the ground, as Hatfield led his men in a thundering charge, and the other three outlaw riders turned to make a fight of it. Hatfield threw down with his Colt and drilled the man on the sandy soil, but not before the Mexican's bullet had swept Pinhead Poyner from the leather, back over his horse's rump, to bounce and roll like a broken rag doll in the dusty buffalo grass. Looking back over his shoulder, Hatfield knew that Pinhead was altogether finished this trip.

The remaining trio of desperadoes stood long enough to fire a couple of rounds at the oncoming riders, but they were outmanned and outgunned. The concerted shooting of Kennedy and Fox Edley, Lefty Hitch and Red Bouchard riddled one mount and its rider, and drove the other pair of raiders into panicky and short-lived flight.

LEFTY HITCH, raging mad over Poyner's downfall, rode down one Mexican and chopped him from saddle with a crushed skull. The other, caught almost simultaneously by three slugs, flew spread-eagled from his pony into a cluster of wanded ocotillo, the curved fronds shimmering long after his body was still on the rusty earth.

The main outlaw force in the north, seeing its flankers destroyed with such devastating suddenness, fired a few long range shots and withdrew from the siege at once, retreating on the San Saba without waiting to ascertain how large a crew had surprised them. By the grace of good fortune and with the loss of but one man, Seagrave and Hatfield were free to move in on the ranch from the east and the west, the field of battle theirs, as if by a miracle. The men themselves could scarcely believe it, exchanging awed looks and shaking their sweaty heads as they reloaded their weapons with trembling fingers.

Riding into the ranch yard, a sense of unreality still persisted in Jim Hatfield, as he swung from the sorrel's lathered back, dispatched men to the barn and sheds. He turned himself to the bullet-scored adobe house, as Seagrave led his detachment in. Pausing to wait for Seagrave, Hatfield was gratified to observe that the other detachment was intact and without casualties.

Seagrave said: "You'll pass as an offensive leader, Hatfield."

"Lucky," Hatfield said, with a deprecatory gesture. "Nobody could be any luckier than we were in that one."

Bouchard came back from the outbuildings. "Two dead in the yard, Jim. Cowboys, from the looks. Them last two, in the barn and shed, they're living but hit pretty bad."

"I'll get to them as soon as we check the house, Red," said Hatfield, his gray-green gaze straying after Lefty Hitch, who was riding out to bring Poyner's body in. "Do what you can to make 'em comfortable, and keep a lookout." He wondered whom they'd find in the adobe, no longer daring to hope it would be Bostater and Travers or Gergen.

The two men in the house were also wounded. One who was evidently the ranch owner, was huddled unconscious at his window sill. The man at the other shattered window was Bostater, a broken hulk in filthy blood-stained buckskins, propped up against the wall and trying to grin at Hatfield. It wasn't until the scout spoke that the Ranger realized that the man was barely alive. Bitterly he thought: "We always get to them too late."

"Hung on, Jim—till you got in," Bostater panted weakly. "But I'm sure—done for. Some sorry mess—all the way. You find—Vantine—Wilkins?"

"We found 'em, Bo," said Hatfield. No point in telling the old-timer *how* they'd found them. "What about Travers and Gergen?"

"Milt's maybe alive — somewhere around. Gergen, I reckon the Injuns got him."

"The silver mine, Bo?"

Bostater cackled feebly. "Silver? Hell fire! Ain't no silver, Jim. All we found—wouldn't mint a dollar."

"Madera and Raskam must think there's silver somewhere on the San Saba, Bo," said Hatfield. "They're the ones that hit your party, aren't they?"

Bostater coughed, scarlet flecking his gray beard stubble, and slumped lower on the wall, his faded blue eyes already fixed and glazing with death. "That scum. They ain't much—just doing the dirty work. Somebody else, Jim—bigger—behind 'em. Reckon it's—it must be—" Bostater stiffened in a final spasm, his eyes going vacant, and slid sideward into slack limpness on the floor.

Jim Hatfield rose from beside him, shaking his dark head, grief clouding his vision and gaunting his stern features. "Gone, Marshal," he murmured. "One of the last of the old plainsmen. And before he could tell us what he wanted to tell. It sure beats hell how we always reach them just too late."

"It does," agreed Seagrave. "That expedition certainly was blighted and doomed from the beginning. It's a wonder any of them lasted as long as they did, alone and

cut off in this enemy country."

"Well, there's work to be done," Hatfield said wearily. "I've got to scrub up and start playing surgeon again here."

SEAGRAVE stared at him with frank admiration. "How'd you ever find time to learn all the things you know, Jim Hatfield?"

Hatfield smiled faintly. "It comes of having an addled mind, I reckon. Trying a lot of different things instead of sticking to one line. That old saw, jack of all trades and master of none, you know."

Seagrave had been skeptical when they told him this big Ranger was so versatile and talented, had studied engineering, knew a little medicine and geology, and was among other things a good cattleman and a sound military tactician, as well as an all-round peace officer. But Seagrave's doubts had vanished along with his initial slight antagonism. He was all for Jim Hatfield now, proud to be working with him.

"About all we're doing is picking up the dead and patching up the wounded," Hatfield said mournfully. "But if we don't accomplish anything else, we're killing off a lot of characters that need killing."

"And the big ones Bo said were behind the bandits," Seagrave said thoughtfully. "The finger would seem to point toward Don Cristobal and company, Jim."

"I reckon so," Hatfield said, rolling up his sleeves and heading for the wash trough behind the kitchen. "If Milt Travers is still around, we've got to find him," he was thinking." In time for once, I hope, to keep him alive." And to get the whole story of the Vantine project, and learn for sure who had promoted all this strife and bloodshed over a silver mine that might not even exist.

Hatfield didn't know how large a force the enemy had operating in this territory, although it must be a formidable one, with their Lipan allies included. But he did know that his crew had cut quite a hole in it. Eleven outlaws today, four in Caddos, three or four back on the plains below the Llano. And uncounted Indians and Mexicans in that wagon train battle on the North Fork.

Fairly safe to assume that the bandits wouldn't be coming back right away, or seeking combat for a while yet. Which would permit Hatfield's little party a much-needed rest, while Hatfield attended the wounded men of the ranch.

When the wounded were cared for, the dead buried, and the spare horses and pack-mules brought in, the men settled down on the ranch to recuperate from the rigors of the campaign. Steve Kemp, the owner of this spread, the Bar K 88, had passed out from loss of blood and exhaustion more than anything else, and made a rapid recovery under Hatfield's treatment.

Neither of the outguards had been dangerously injured either. Towlin had a torn arm and a concussion from the slug that grazed his skull and knocked him out. Oslund had suffered a clean shoulder wound and a broken wrist. Both came along quickly under the care of Jim Hatfield.

The other men cleaned up the spread, repaired the damage left by the siege, and rounded up the Bar K 88 cattle and horses. Once well-rested and restored, these routine chores were a pleasure, after what the men had been through on the trail.

Kemp had derived some sketchy facts about the Vantine expedition from Bostater, who had dragged himself into the ranch one night, on foot after his horse was shot in under him, wounded, starving, half-dead from exposure and hardships. A few days later the outlaws had come, having tracked Bostater to the ranch.

Bo had wanted to run for it and take those bloodhounds off the Bar K 88, but Kemp and his raiders had insisted on keeping Bostater there and fighting off the raiders.

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CHAPTER VIII

Bar K 88

MADERA and Raskam had never bothered Kemp before, but he wasn't unduly bitter about it having happened now. Kemp had known Bostater by reputation, had recognized him as a man highly worth saving, if possible, and was himself a Texan always ready to fight in a just cause, or defend the oppressed against the powers of evil.

Steve Kemp liked Hatfield and his men, appreciated the medical attention, and pledged Bar K 88 to aid the Ranger and Lloyd Seagrave in any way possible. Oslund and Towlin, his remaining riders, concurred with their boss in this. As soon as they were able to ride, the cowhands led scouting details out over the countryside, along the San Saba, and into the hills of the high country that separated these headwaters from the Pecos River.

Wichita, the principal settlement in the area, was one outlaw stronghold. The other, the hidden headquarters, was most likely in the wild uplands, perhaps somewhere in the vicinity of Cerro del Almagre. The exploring party saw that cone-shaped red hill in the distance.

Kemp said he knew about the legendary lost mine but didn't put much stock in the story. Madera and Raskam must take it literally, however, for they wouldn't allow anyone else to enter the Red Hill territory. Kemp had no ideas concerning the power behind the bandits. He had taken it for granted they were on their own, and it was common gossip that they had aroused the long-peaceful Lipans with cheap whisky and excellent firearms. Though just why, was not known.

There was little or no law in this wilderness to oppose the Border ruffians. Hatfield and Seagrave, now that they had come, represented the only real law in the area, with nine men to help them uphold and enforce it, against hordes of savages and Border renegades. A total of eleven men now, invested with the sovereign power of the state and the nation, riding the range on which a previous Federal expedition of thirty had been annihilated to a man.

Unless Milt Travers still lived, and in all their scouting forays they discovered not a single trace of the tall, blond Ranger.

It seemed strangely peaceful all of a sudden in the San Saba. Indian parties passed the Bar K 88 and made no hostile move toward the spread. Heavily-armed bodies of white riders went by, with nothing more than a cursory examination of the layout. Quiet settled on the land and the river.

Hatfield and his men helped work the ranch, between their trips of exploration, and began to grow fretful with waiting and inactivity. The Ranger and Seagrave tried in vain to formulate a satisfactory plan of action. There were flaws and holes in every scheme they developed.

Red Bouchard requested permission to scout the hill country alone, and Hatfield let him go, because Red had lived with the Osages in the Nations and was half-Indian himself in many ways. A week later Bouchard returned with something for Hatfield to set his teeth in. He hadn't found any silver mine, but he *had* located the hidden upland headquarters of the outlaws.

They were all there, Hook Raskam and Madera, Ortega, Cervantes, Rope Linchan, and the rest of the professional killers. And they had a captive, a lanky fair-haired young man, whom Red took to be the missing Ranger, Milt Travers.

"There's no sense moving against that place in force—if you can call what we got a force," Red said. "We'd never make it that way. But a couple or three men might sneak in there, and with luck, grab that yeller-haired feller out of the place."

"That's for you and me, Red," Jim Hatfield said softly.

Seagrave wanted to go, but Hatfield said the chief marshal was too valuable a man to risk on such a mission. Kennedy and Hightower volunteered, but he turned

them down for similar reasons. The others all wanted to accompany them, too, Lefty Hitch in particular still craving revenge for Pinhead Poyner's death.

After some deliberation, Hatfield accepted Lefty Hitch, gunsharp, gambler and ne'er-do-well, who knew his way around the woods as well as in a casino of chance. And Lefty smiled for the first time since Pinhead had gone down on that slope above the Bar K 88.

THE THREE riders left in the night and struck due west toward the highlands, with grub enough for a week packed on an extra saddle horse, and shells enough to fight an army.

"We're getting somewhere at last," Hatfield thought. "Good old Red Bush. It was a lucky day when I bumped into him at the bar of the Bella Union in San Antone. A fine day when I first found Red in that hermit's cabin up in the Indian Nations. And Milt Travers is still alive. We've got something to ride for now, and we'll have somebody to shoot at before we're done!"

They lined out in the light of the moon under a sky jeweled with brilliant stars, Hatfield on his tall golden sorrel. Bouchard riding a big dun claybank. Hitch astride a tough wiry chestnut, and leading the combination pack and saddle horse, which was ostensibly for Travers on the return trip. A night hawk cried as it foraged the cedar brakes for prey, and the distant howling of wolves and coyotes was mournful and lonely in the vastness of night. Somewhere a nightingale sang with fluted heart-breaking sweetness.

"How'd Travers look, Red?" asked Hatfield. "They been treating him rough?"

"Well, he was thinned down like a starved timber wolf, mighty gaunt, but they hadn't been too rough on him lately, I'd say. Looked like they was saving him for somebody else to come and question him."

"Waiting for the big one—or ones," Hatfield said. "Fortunate for Milt and for us, too. What's the hideout like, Red?"

"Built on a shelf, stout log buildings backed by a steep cliff. Cliffs in front, too, with only one trail up for horses. Barricaded at the front rim, they could hold off a regiment. The pass is always guarded."

"Can you climb the front cliffs on foot?"

"Could be done, but you'd probably get knocked off. I found a way down the back cliff, though, and a place to leave our horses. They let Travers out to walk behind the big house once in awhile. We can maybe get a rope down to him and haul him up the wall."

"Good work, Red," said Hatfield. "You've got it all set up."

Bouchard spat tobacco juice. "It ain't going to be as simple as it sounds, Jim."

Two days later they were well up on the heights above the outlaw hideaway, climbing slopes somber with pine and rippling with aspens, or winding up rock-walled corridors littered with boulders and shale. Bouchard led them to the sunken, shaded pocket which he had selected for the horses. Hatfield and Hitch took ropes and left their carbines behind, while Bouchard rigged a sling to carry his rifle on his back. They were going to need both hands for climbing.

After toiling upward for an hour that seemed endless, working their way up naked stone faces, narrow chimneys, and drifts of talus, Bouchard guided them into a crevice that opened midway up the precipice, above and behind the bandit stronghold.

From the brush-covered mouth they studied the layout on the ledge below. A main building at the rear, flanked by smaller log structures. A barrier of boulders at the outer edge, commanded the sheer craggy slopes below the camp. The single trail rose to the shelf between solid walls of stone. As Bouchard had inferred, the place was practically impregnable to any open attack in force.

Riflemen were posted along the barricade, and at the entrance gate. A pole corral held about thirty-five horses, and the nearby lean-to shed was hung with saddle gear. A spring, trickling from the bottom of the cliff, formed a pool in back of the main building, from which water was

piped to various troughs. Stunted pines, blackjack and laurel offered shade along the broad level ledge. It was almost a perfect mountain hideout.

The afternoon hours passed with little activity in the camp, except for the changing of sentries and watering of horses. In their shrouded cleft fifty feet above the shelf, Hatfield and his comrades waited with forced patience, watching the eagles soar about loftier pinnacles in the distance.

It was four o'clock when two men emerged at the rear of the big rectangular structure and walked toward the pool. It was Milt Travers all right, haggard and worn, and in tattered clothing, but apparently uninjured. The bored guard paid little attention to his prisoner. There was no chance of escape. Hatfield's heart lifted at the sight of the familiar lank figure with the tousled sunny hair.

MILT TRAVERS knelt at the pool and drank, then washed his face and hands, rising to dry himself with a bandanna. The guard, a stocky bandy-legged Mexican stood thirty feet away, thumbs in gun-belt. Travers grinned and said something to him. The man spat and grimaced, slicing a stubby hand back and forth across his own throat.

In the niche above, Hatfield readied his long rope, and Bouchard cradled his rifle. Lefty Hitch was staring hungrily at the Mexican, thin lips skinned back over his teeth, eyes flaring with hatred.

Hatfield tossed a pebble into the pool of water, and let his looped lariat slither down the cliffside. Travers looked up in surprise and saw the down-snaking rope. The guard saw it, too, and reached for his guns. Red Bouchard's rifle *spanged* cleanly, and the Mexican was knocked backward, flat on his shoulders, the bullet tearing through him from the left breast to the right hip.

Lefty Hitch lined his Colt handguns with a wolfish grin, as two more bandits burst from the back door, their guns coming to bear on Travers, who was at the base of the cliff now, fixing the loop about his body under the arms. Lefty Hitch fired, left and right, the guns blaring and bucking his hands, the slugs smashing the two outlaws to the ground.

The outposts were running back from their forward positions, and Red Bouchard turned his carbine on them, triggering and levering swiftly. Two of the sentries went down, rolling in the dust, and the others scrambled for shelter.

Hatfield was heaving and hauling mightily on the rope now, the effort straining every corded muscle in arms, shoulders, back and legs. Rifle fire spouted from rear windows below, raking the rock around the suspended Travers and screeching into the fissure above. Lefty Hitch emptied his guns at those windows, shattering glass and driving the marksmen back from the sills. Lefty then laid hold of the lariat,

A TALL TEXAS TALE

BIGGER THAN AIRPLANES

THERE was this man in spats and a lavender turtleneck sweater who stops into Fertile Myrtle's fruit farm one day. He squints at the stuff on display and sort of snuffles his tonsils.

"Them watermelons look a mite stunted to me," he says. "I'm from Ioway, and the watermelons we got up there take two men to lift 'em. You sure these little fellers is ripe?"

"They're ripe, all right," says Myrtle without batting an eyebrow. "But they ain't watermelons. These here are cucumbers, Texas style. You see that hangar over yonder where they used to keep airplanes. Well, that's where we store our watermelons. We can't get near as many in there as they used to get airplanes, of course, but what was left over we just smashed up to make that lake you just passed. Comes in handy in the dry season. But I don't guess you could do anything like that with them little two-man melons you raise up in Ioway."

This man in the lavender turtleneck grins sort of sheepish. Then he says, "Touché," which means he's had enough.

to help Hatfield lift Travers up the wall, both men retreating along the crevice with stamping boot heels, every sinew strained as if in a tug-of-war.

Red Bouchard poured rifle fire down until the Winchester was spent, then cut loose with his Colt .44s aflame. Showers of stone dust and rock splinters sprayed the three men, but Travers was nearing the top now. Bouchard reached out to give him a final hoist over the rim, and they fell back at once out of range and danger, except from the ricochets that went on screaming about them. Moving back in the corridor, panting and sweating hard, they were soon beyond all reach of enemy gunfire, pausing to reload their weapons while Hatfield recoiled his rope.

"You're sure heavy for a skinny boy, Milt," he said, laboring for breath. He introduced the young Ranger to the other two men.

Travers grinned boyishly. "They've been feeding me pretty good lately, Jim. Fattening me for the kill, I reckon."

They exchanged notes and stories as they pressed along the narrow rift, and Travers was saddened to hear of the deaths of Bostater and Wilkins and Vantine.

"I must be the only one left," he muttered, shaking his blond head. "Understand they tortured Gergen to death. The big chief was comin' to take care of me personally."

"Who is the big chief, Milt?" asked Hatfield.

"I don't know, Jim. But he's in Wichita. I know that."

"In Wichita?" Hatfield said, with amazement. "Are you sure?"

Travers nodded. "He's there all right, Jim. With some of the other higher-ups. It's quite an organization, you know."

"What about the mine?"

"I don't know about that," Travers said. "*They* think it's there, but they haven't found it. They think we know where it was, have a map or something."

Red Bouchard kept glancing over his shoulder. "Didn't expect any pursuit from behind, but I hear something," he grumbled. "How the hell could they get up that wall?"

"They've got ladders for it," Travers said. "They'll be coming along after us."

"We can blast 'em right here in this passage," Lefty Hitch said.

"Yeah, Lefty," said Hatfield drily. "But while we're doing that, the others'll be circling around to cut us off from the back."

"You want me to lay back and hold 'em right here, Jim?" asked Hitch.

"No, Lefty," Hatfield said. "We're all going to make it together."

"There's a quicker way down, Jim," said Red Bouchard. "If you don't mind taking some twenty- and thirty-foot jumps into gravel washes."

"The quickest way's what we want, Red," said the Ranger. "Once we get on those horses we're halfway out of here."

CHAPTER IX

Highland Passage

REACHING the back end of the crevice, the fleeing men paused for breath. The sounds of pursuit behind them were becoming louder. Lefty Hitch eyed a clump of boulders overlooking the mouth of the corridor.

"What a place to fort up and cut them to pieces," he mumbled. "Let's do it, Jim. It won't take us long."

"We've got to keep moving, Lefty," Hatfield said patiently. "It's our only chance to get out of these hills."

Bouchard grinned through his red beard. "Don't be so damn blood-thirsty, Lefty. We'll have plenty of time to kill off them critters."

They moved out of that deep cleft into the open, and were abreast of the natural rock barricade when bullets crackled overhead. Somehow the outlaws had closed up on them with unbelievable speed, and rifle flashes were spurting from that narrow portal in the cliffs.

Clawing out their guns, they returned

the fire and drifted into the cover of the massive jumbled boulders. All save Hitch. Lefty was still standing out in the clear, firing with one hand after the other, the flames jetting almost continuously, the reports blending and echoing away like thunderclaps on the heights.

Even as Hatfield turned to shout at him, Lefty Hitch was struck and shocked to his knees, one leg twisted in a grotesque disjointed manner. Kneeling and swaying, he went on lashing fire from his .44 Colts. Already two bandits were flattened in the mouth of the pass, and the others were ducking back to safety.

With Bouchard and Travers pouring fire into that aperture, Red with his carbine, Milt with one of Red's handguns, Jim Hatfield dodged into the open and ran toward Hitch. Just before Jim reached him, Lefty was hit again, low in the body this time, the wallop of slug driving him over backward. The angle of his broken leg was sickening. Clutching him under the armpits, Hatfield dragged him back to the tumbled rockpile, with bullets breathing close and beating dirt over them both.

"I knew—this was my place—to fort up," Lefty Hitch wheezed out slowly. "Beyond orders—Jim. Load up—for me. I'll hold 'em—right here. They'll never get—out of that hole—in the wall."

Ejecting the empty cases and filling Lefty's cylinders with fresh shells, Hatfield moved his dark head from side to side, muttering: "Why, Lefty?" He knew the man was finished, gutshot and crippled.

"They killed Pinhead, Jim," said Lefty Hitch. "Got to—get a lot of 'em—for old Pinhead."

"We'll get you out of here, Lefty," said Hatfield, knowing it was impossible even as he spoke the words.

"I'm staying, Jim," panted Hitch. "Hell, I'm dying—good as dead—now. But I can—ping them buzzards down. Move me—into—a good place. And get going—on your way."

With great but gentle strength, Hatfield lifted and eased him into firing position behind a split boulder. "We aren't leaving you, Lefty."

"Hell fire, man," Lefty said. "Your duty—to leave me. You can't waste—three lives—on one half-dead carcass."

Hatfield knew Lefty was right, and still he couldn't bring himself to abandon the dying man. "We'll hang around a while, Lefty."

Hitch was scornful. "You a man—or a scared button? You a Ranger—or what? Drag the hell—out of here. I don't need—no help."

The enemy came filtering out of the passage once more, but the mortally wounded Hitch was the first to fire, his guns blasting and jerking in his taut, clawed hands. The others chimed in, dropping a couple more Mexicans, chasing the others back out of sight. But a glancing shot had caught Lefty Hitch in the side of the head, and there was no further question about it now. Lefty Hitch was going to stay here alone, a dead man holding the pass.

Carefully and tenderly, Hatfield removed Hitch's belt and took the guns from his frozen grasp. He looked down at him, a lash of pain across his gray-green eyes. Society saw Lefty Hitch as a no-good loafer, gambler, gunman, and sometimes drunkard. But Jim Hatfield was saying farewell to a *man.*

He handed the belt and guns to Travers. "Reckon Lefty would want a good man wearing and using these, Milt. Let's travel now."

THEY CREPT away under cover and started down the steep mountainside toward their horses. There were no gunshots from behind them, not until they were far away and below, leaping and sliding down a last drift of gravel and talus near the bowl in which their mounts were tethered. Lefty Hitch was still holding them off up there, just as he had promised. . . .

In the morning, having made their getaway and a cold camp deep in the hills that reared between the easterly river sources and the Pecos flowing on the west, they headed east toward the San Saba.

The clean-cut isolated peak of Cerro del Almagre loomed shining red in the sun before them, towering above lesser summits and woodlands. They scanned it with the awed interest that such a historic and blood-stepped landmark always arouses.

"The Red Hill is sacred to the Lipans, for some reason," Milt Travers said. "That's why white men have never got in there to find that silver mine—if there is such a mine. There's a Lipan village nearby, and they hold tribal ceremonies at the Hill. Even these bandits tread mighty easy around Cerro del Almagre."

"The mine was supposed to have been discovered by the Spanish," said Hatfield. "But the Indians wiped them out and drove them away, according to the legend. I wonder how many men have died on account of that lost mine?"

Red Bouchard snorted and spat. "Too many! Let the Lipans keep it, I say."

"I think the Federal Government will agree with you, after this, Red," said Hatfield, with a wry smile. "Reckon we'd better swing wide around the Red Hill and that Indian camp."

They made a long circuit to the south, traveling with wary caution, and several times they had to seek cover and hold their mounts' nostrils while parties of Lipan warriors passed. They avoided detection, perhaps because the braves were hunting game instead of white men.

Late that afternoon they came upon the tracks of five iron-shod horses pointing in the direction of the Red Hill. Travers got down and examined the hoofmarks with close interest.

"They gave me the chore of shoeing horses up in that hideout," the blond Ranger explained. "And I shod some of them so I'd recognize the tracks, if I ever got out of there and ran across 'em again. If I'm not mistaken, Jim, the five big boys from the hills are riding in to report my escape to the top chief in Wichita. And they're going by way of the Lipan village, maybe to drop off some more firewater and guns."

"We'll string along after them," Jim Hatfield said. "If we could gun out those big ones, it would go a long way toward breaking up that outfit."

"They're probably going to send the Injuns on the warpath again, and most likely after our scalps," Red Bouchard predicted.

"Or send them out to hit the Bar K 88," Hatfield said soberly.

The three riders struck a swifter pace and were gradually closing up on the five horsemen ahead as the afternoon waned, and the sun sank toward the mountain ramparts west of the Pecos. When darkness came, they saw a campfire glowing in a ravine, and knew the men they followed had halted to prepare supper.

Leaving Bouchard and Travers behind with the horses, Jim Hatfield stalked forward on foot to scout the camp, slowing and moving as silent as a shadow when he neared the little gully. Stretched flat on the upper rim, Hatfield peered down into the circle of firelight, close enough to hear voices and smell the fragrance of boiling coffee and frying steaks.

Travers had read his horseshoes correctly. The five sub-chiefs of the Border renegades were there below him, their dark harsh faces polished ruddily by the dancing flames. Madera, big and rugged, with a huge beak of a nose and a cruel downturned mouth. Long, lean, hawk-faced Hook Raskam, and brawny Rope Linchan, wicked-eyed and vicious-mouthed. The sly suave Cervantes, and Ortega, a great ugly bull of a man.

HATFIELD'S teeth clenched hard as he looked at them, his jaw-bones ridged with muscle, eyes on fire and trigger fingers itching. There they were like monstrous ducks sitting on a pond, but before killing them he wanted to hear them talk, grinning bleakly as he realized they likely were discussing him.

"It's that damn Hatfield," grated Rope Linchan. "Everything's gone wrong since he got up here."

Madera gestured in disgust. "They are not strong enough to hurt us. A dozen men at the most. What can they do in this country?"

"They've done plenty, if you ask me," Hook Raskam said. "But I figure their luck's about run out. We'll turn the Lipans loose on the Bar K 88, and that'll be the end of that two-bit spread and most of Hatfield's men."

Cervantes smiled under the thin waxed line of his mustache. "Providing the Indians have more success there than our men did."

Ortega uttered a bull-like snort. "There won't be anybody to jump the Lipans from behind. They'll run over that ranch like a prairie fire."

"If there's enough whisky left," Linchan said drily. "That last load went up in flames, thanks to that damned Hatfield."

"We all know that," Madera said impatiently. "But there's enough left to carry them through one more massacre anyway. And that's all we need. I want Hatfield for myself."

"Not if I get to him first," said Hook Raskam.

"I'll have Travers for mine," Ortega said. "I told you I should have broken his bones when we took him. We were too easy on that young *caballero*. Next time I will take him apart limb from limb, as you'd strip rotten branches from a tree."

Rope Linchan laughed. "I'll settle for that red-whiskered runt. He almost shot my ears off with that rifle of his yesterday."

"The boss won't like the news we bring him much," suggested Cervantes, with his oily smile.

"The boss!" Madera said. "He's only one man. Why fear him so?"

"He is four men," argued Cervantes. "And all devils."

Madera snapped his fingers and spat into the orange coals. "*That* for all of them! What would they be without us? Less than nothing!"

Hook Raskam shifted restlessly. "Let's eat and get on to Cerro del Almagre. We want them Lipans riding first thing in the morning."

"Yeah, before Hatfield gets back," Rope Linchan added.

Madera tossed his great spread hands. "Hatfield! Hatfield! You think he is almighty? I will show you that he dies like any other man, and perhaps not so well as some."

"Gergen died poorly," Cervantes said. "Screaming and begging like a female. And Senor Wilkins, how he screamed when his fingers went. Then the other hand, then that arm to the elbow."

"And still he got away from your sleepy *vaqueros*," Hook Raskam said. "All them peons are fit for is tending sheep!"

"Eat," ordered Madera. "Shut up now and eat. We babble here like old women over their wine. The time has come to act instead of talk."

Hatfield thought: "They don't like one another much. They are going to die in poor company."

CHAPTER X

Cerro Del Almagre

CAREFULLY Hatfield withdrew from the lip of the cut, and waited for his vision to adjust itself to the outer darkness. The moon was hidden behind silver-limned clouds, and only a few stars sparkled through the overcast. Hatfield got up and started down the slight uneven grade, stepping lightly, disturbing the brush with caution.

A creeping vine must have caught his spur then, entangling itself on the rowel and tugging him off-balance. His hand flailed twigs as he lurched, and a branch cracked with the sound of a bullwhip.

Hatfield took a long lunging stride in an effort to hold his feet, but something snagged his ankle and he pitched forward, landing hard on one shoulder in the squat greasewood shrubs at the bottom, rolling and clawing at his guns.

The bandit chieftains boiled up out of the ravine, and gun flames speared down at Hatfield, the concussions shattering the night stillness. But the outlaws' eyes were

dulled from the campfire glare, and their shots crackled through the scrubby undergrowth, sparking off rocks and raising fountains of earth.

Flat on the ground, Hatfield lined and let go with his right-hand Colt, rolling at once away from the blossoming muzzle light. Cervantes fell backward from the rim, half his sly face shot away, and the other four dropped into cover, their guns stabbing bright and loud, searching the darkness.

Red Bouchard and Milt Travers were coming up at a gallop, Red swinging left to cover the mouth of the gully, and Milt slanting out to turn the right flank. Two of the bandits, Ortega and Rope Linchan, slid down the bank to kick and trample out the fire and run for their horses. Madera and Raskam stayed at the top, hammering away at Hatfield and the two riders racing up to his support. Bouchard and Travers were firing from the saddle as they came, and the night was slashed vividly with flaring guns, torn by jarring reports and drumming hoofbeats.

Ortega, always the bull, mounted his horse at a run and came charging straight out the mouth of the arroyo, riding right into the sudden blooming fire from Red Bouchard's leveled barrel. Snarling blood and strangled curses, Ortega rocked back over the cantle, skidded off the rump of his rearing mount, bouncing and twisting loosely in a hummock of mescal. Bouchard threw down and slammed home another shot just to make sure.

Rope Linchan brought his buckskin whirling about and headed deeper into the dry wash, snapping a shot at the rim as Milt Travers showed there, sliding Lefty Hitch's chestnut to a halt and opening up with one of Lefty's .44s. The buckskin went end-over-end in the storming dust, hurling Linchan headlong through space. He struck a slab of stone, and Travers could hear the sickening sodden crunch of his skull against the rock.

No more trouble there. Travers tried to knee the chestnut about, but the horse was sagging earthward, dead as Travers kicked clear of the stirrups and fell into a clump of creosote.

Bouchard had diverted his fire to the two at the top of the ravine wall, and tall Hook Raskam heaved himself erect as a slug smashed him from below. Hatfield targeted the lanky form and thumbed off a shot from his nest of greasewood on the other side. Hook Raskam spun toppling down the bank into the scattered embers of the cook fire.

The moon cleared a cloud then, flooding the landscape with dazzling silvery light, and Madera came crashing down the slope behind blazing guns, straight at Hatfield's position at the bottom. With lead chewing the shrubbery on all sides of him, Jim Hatfield rose to meet that reckless charge of desperation. His right-hand Colt clicked empty, but the left one roared aflame, rocking Hatfield's hand and wrist.

The impact checked Madera's mad rush. He folded in the middle, bent at the knees, and plunged forward, his guns exploding at his feet. Hatfield stepped aside to avoid his falling bulk, and Madera crashed face down into the greasewood brush, shuddering into abrupt stillness.

THE QUIET of the night was eerie after all that shooting, and the moonlight had an ethereal quality. Hatfield coughed and spat from a dry mouth, rank with the taste of gunpowder. Bouchard rode around the front edge of the ravine, registering relief when he saw Hatfield standing upright and unhurt, the smoking Colts hanging in his big hands.

Travers came stumbling down the slope and joined them. It was all over, but they couldn't quite believe it. Five dead outlaw leaders, and themselves untouched. Lefty Hitch's chestnut was their only casualty.

"You boys moved in real fast," Hatfield said. "I almost ruined everything. Getting clumsy, I guess— Well, that leaves just the big ones in Wichita."

"Was they going to rouse the Injuns, Jim?" asked Bouchard.

Hatfield nodded. "They were going to send them against the Bar K 88."

"We going into Wichita, Jim?" inquired Travers hopefully.

"I reckon, Milt," said Jim Hatfield. "The odds are evening up all the time. Three of us can wander in unnoticed, where a bigger bunch couldn't. We might as well go to town and get it over with, boys."

Red Bouchard grinned and pulled at his beard. "You write the ticket, Jim. We'll ride it out with you to the end of the line."

Hatfield whistled, a high, piercing note, and Goldy came up on the run, herding the extra horse along with him. The spare mount was going to be useful, after all. Redistributing the packs, they swung into the leather and turned east again toward Wichita, and what should be the end of this long death-ridden trail.

Wichita, like Caddos Corner, had grown up around an old and now defunct Indian agency, and was situated near the fork of a river, in this case the San Saba. It was a larger and more active community, however, its adobe and wooden buildings of better construction, a fairly sizable town with many stores, saloons, restaurants and gambling emporiums.

It was after midnight when Jim Hatfield and his two companions rode in, but the establishments were still ablaze with lights and thronged with people. They left their horses in a livery barn off the main street, lingering to see that they were well cared for, rubbed down, properly watered and grained, while the men themselves washed up at a trough. Back on the street they turned into an all-night café to appease their own appetites with a full hot meal and quantities of strong coffee.

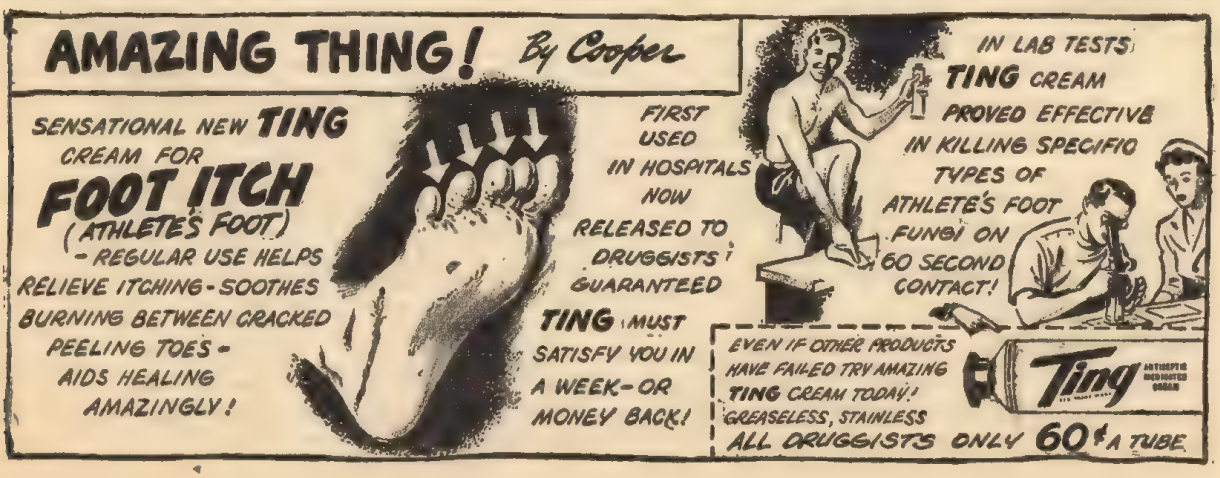
Replenished and restored, they lighted cigars and drifted unobtrusively about the settlement, looking like three hardcase saddle tramps, with their unshaven faces, trail-worn dusty clothing, and low-slung guns on either side of their hips. They received cold hostile stares from various Mexican and American riders, who looked as if they might belong to the outlaw crew, but passed unrecognized and unchallenged. The outlaws who would have known them were either dead or out in the hills.

They stopped in several saloons for drinks, hoping they might overhear some gossip about the big chief and his confederates, but the talk was of women and liquor and cards, cattle and horses and business. Wichita might have been any outlying frontier town, instead of the headquarters of the worst desperadoes north of the Rio Grande and east of the Pecos.

Finally they picked up their saddle-bags and retired to the Colorado Hotel, where they got rooms and paid the sleepy-eyed clerk well for bringing up tubs of hot water for bathing and shaving. Feeling wonderfully refreshed and clean after a bath and a shave, Milt Travers and Red Bouchard were ready for bed, but Jim Hatfield found that he was not sleepy, in spite of of his weariness. The others turned in for the night, but Hatfield dressed in clean clothes from his saddle-bags and descended once more to the dim-lighted empty lobby.

He was smoking and deep in thought,

[*Turn page*]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lounging comfortably in a leather chair before the window overlooking the main thoroughfare, when feminine footsteps tapped across the porch and a woman entered the front door, wearing a dark, hooded cape and a faintly familiar perfume. Straightening in his chair, Hatfield glimpsed a pure proud profile under the hood. Surprise and excitement stirred in him. He had seen her but once, to his knowledge, yet Dolores Cristobal was not a girl to forget.

"Senorita," he called softly, as she walked toward the stairway.

STARTLED, she whirled with lithe grace and stared into the shadows. Hatfield rose and walked forward, hat in hand. In the girl's lovely face were fear and anguish as she identified him with a sigh.

"I was afraid you would come here, Jim Hatfield. But you must not stay. You cannot stay, if you wish to live."

"What are you doing here, senorita?" he countered.

"You don't know?" Her surprise seemed as honest as her distress.

"No, I don't. I thought you were in Mexico."

Dolores smiled inscrutably. "Is the great Lone Wolf that gullible?"

"At times, I reckon." Hatfield knew now that what he had suspected for some time was true beyond a doubt. This girl's father was the leader of the band, responsible for the all the killing that had attended this treasure hunt. And Castro, Guerra and Juanillo were his lieutenants. "Do you want to talk about it, senorita?" he went on kindly.

She shrugged with Latin grace. "Not particularly, senor. Although I guess it doesn't matter—now." Her tone was as hopeless as the despair in her dark eyes.

"Where's your father?"

"Waiting for some men to arrive."

"He'll have a long wait," Hatfield said gravely. "The men are dead."

"How would you know?" Dolores Cristobal asked indifferently.

"I was there. I saw them."

"You mean—you killed them?"

"Some of them," Hatfield admitted quietly. "Nobody ever deserved to die any more than they did."

Dolores made a hopeless gesture. "Don't you suppose I know? Don't you think I realize how bad this whole thing is?"

"I doubt if you realize the full extent of it," Hatfield said. "Or how many men—both good and bad—have died because of it." He reached out and took her hand, drawing her gently toward the row of chairs. "Come and sit down for a minute, senorita."

Acting stunned, stricken, she sank into a chair, and Hatfield sat on the edge of the next one. "I don't understand a man like your father. A gentleman of the finest Castilian blood."

"Sometimes they are the cruelest of all," she murmured. "You will kill him too, I suppose—if you can?"

"I'll try to take him alive."

"You will never do that, Jim Hatfield," Dolores said coldly. "And there are three others to be killed before you reach my father."

"Is Castro—is he anything to you?"

"He would like to be. And he is really a beautiful boy. But I—I have always been foolish. I threw my heart away on an impossible fantastic dream." She smiled, but her dark eyes were filled with a lonely pain.

"What connects Don Cristobal with this legendary silver mine?"

"The blood of his ancestors," she said promptly. "There's no harm in your knowing now. His grandfather discovered the mine, but died before he could exploit it. His father relocated the mine years afterward and was killed there. The family map disappeared with his death. My father's lifelong ambition has been to find the silver, which he considers his by right of heritage. Little else has mattered to him in this world. Is that sufficient explanation?"

Hatfield inclined his crisp dark head. "It is, senorita. The whole affair is regrettable. But as you know, I have no alternative."

"I know," Dolores said wearily. "You will die, or they will die. So many more lives charged against that silver mine, which I believe no white man will ever see again."

"I agree about the mine," Hatfield said. "But that has become almost irrelevant now. Your father cannot be allowed to go on, Senorita Dolores."

"He should have been stopped before now." She sighed. "I know that. I've tried to stop him. But it's an obsession with him, nearly a form of madness. He has wealth enough without that silver, you see. Yet he has devoted his whole life to searching for the lost mine of Cerro del Almagre. And it has cost him a fortune, of course."

CHAPTER XI

Rose of Castile

DOLORES, Hatfield realized, was intelligent, philosophical—and terribly resigned. It was as if, in the full bloom of youth and beauty, Dolores Cristobal had ceased living and hoping. It was a tragic thing to witness. Hatfield's heart went out to her, but he didn't know what to say. What could you say to a girl, whose father you were duty-bound to arrest or kill?

Dolores leaned toward him. "Have you no curiosity concerning the dream I wasted my love on, Jim Hatfield?"

He smiled embarrassedly. "I haven't any right to be curious."

Her smile flashed, as suddenly reckless as her warm eyes. "All the right in the world, senor. It involves you."

Remembering their first meeting, Hatfield knew then what she meant, and a flush heated his bronzed cheeks in the dimness. "But that can't be, senorita," he protested. "Just a childish fancy."

"Brought up as I was, isolated from boys and then from men, it can happen," Dolores Cristobal declared. "A girl can fall in love from afar. See one man and make an idol of him. Close her heart to all others. It doesn't make sense, but it happens—in certain cases like mine." She laughed brokenly. "The fair lady in her ivory tower, and the knight riding past below her windows. A big dark knight on a great golden horse, Jim Hatfield."

"Senorita, I think you're dramatizing a little," Hatfield said.

She shrugged and spread her hands. "It is of no importance anyway. The lady cannot hold the knight responsible, even if she would. . . Do you want to see my father tonight?"

"I'd like to get it finished. But I don't think it'd be very smart to go against four of them single-handed."

"Only Castro is with him. Castro is the best, you know."

"I might risk those odds," Hatfield said. "Where are they?"

"We have a house here," Dolores said. "Another walled house of stone." She laughed with a bitter note. "My father and Castro are there, on the downstream side of town."

"And Guerra and Juanillo?"

"In some barroom or gaming hall, I suppose."

"You want to take me to your father?" he asked wonderingly.

"Why not? You will get to him sooner or later. If I am there, perhaps I can prevent some killing. Save my father's life—or yours."

Hatfield shook his head. "I can't let you interfere."

"All right, then," she murmured dully. "I'll walk with you as far as the wall."

They rose together and the girl swayed toward him, her arms clutching fiercely at his rangy raw-boned frame. Hatfield held her with firm tenderness, emotion welling up into a knotted pain in his throat, and brushed his lips across the fragrant black sheen of her hair, beneath the pushed-back hood. There was an urgent need in both of them, but Hatfield held himself aloof and restrained, with a tremendous effort, trying to soothe and comfort her like a clumsy big brother.

"All right," she whispered. "You are wiser than I am. We'll go now."

They left the lobby and went down the veranda steps, turning left toward the eastern outskirts. The street was quieter now, deserted except for a few late stragglers and the ponies drooping at the hitchracks. Only a few palaces of pleasure remained open, and little noise issued from them. Wichita was sleeping as fully as it it ever did.

They walked in easy unison, as if long accustomed to matching their strides, and Hatfield thought wistfully. "If things had been different, we might have got along fine together."

Oblivious to the two men who stepped out of an alley behind them, they strolled on along the shadow-patterned dimness of the slat sidewalk.

The two men followed silently, catfooted in the thick dust of the street. Hatfield heard only the creaking of boards under their own measured strides, unaware of danger—until gun blasts shattered the quiet at their backs, ripping out viciously and rolling from wall to adobe wall.

Wheeling around, swift and smooth, his guns leaping into his hands with automatic speed and control, Jim Hatfield saw two reeling crumbling forms directly in the rear, with two other men crossing toward them at a tangent, guns flashing and roaring in their hands. Stricken were Guerrra and Juanillo, the wide burly man twisting belly-down over an empty hitchrail, the slim dapper young fellow sitting down awkwardly in the gutter, firing once into the dirt, then falling slowly backward.

THE SHOOTING ceased and the echoes diminished.

Hatfield smiled as he recognized his two benefactors, saluting him with smoking guns. Trim, neat Lloyd Seagrave, Chief U.S. Marshal, and tough, bowlegged Fox Edley, former badman and gunfighter.

"You're getting careless, Hatfield," reproved Seagrave, glancing at the girl. "But perhaps you're not to be blamed in this instance."

"I'm sure glad you happened to be in town, Marshal," said Hatfield.

Fox Edley yanked Guerra's dead bulk off the rack and dropped it in the ditch beside Juanillo's slight, elegant body.

"Hey, I know them two hombres. They was bodyguards to Don Cristobal, back in San Antone."

"That's right, Fox," said Hatfield. "Also his lieutenants in command of these Border outlaws. There are only two left now —Don Cristobal himself and Castro. This is Senorita Dolores Cristobal. We were on our way to visit those last two."

Doors were banging open and men came running in the street. But they fell back at once before a menacing display of sixguns and the official gleam of Seagrave's gold badge, his mention of the authority of the United States Government.

"We'll walk along after you, Ranger," said Seagrave. "As soon as I explain things to this town marshal I see coming, who is probably in the pay of Don Cristobal, too."

"Anything I hate is tinhorn crooked lawdogs," grumbled Fox Edley. "If he gets ornery I'll give him a taste of the gunbarrel."

Dolores and Hatfield moved on out the plank walk, the girl shivering at his side now. "I wasn't leading you into a trap," she pleaded. "I didn't know Juan and Guerra were there."

"I believe you, Dolores."

"I—I hope you don't have to kill my father, Jim."

"So do I," Hatfield said earnestly. "I'll do my best to take him alive."

"He's wrong, I know he's wrong," Dolores murmured. "But he's my father, and I love him."

"Sure, sure you do," Hatfield said miserably. "We won't hurt him if we can possibly help it. He—he's really unbalanced about that mine."

"Watch out for Castro, though," warned the girl. "He's lightning fast, wicked with those guns. And he hates you terribly, Jim Hatfield. Because he knows I—he knows how I feel about you."

"Will the place be guarded, senorita?"

"No, it's not guarded," Dolores said. "This has always been their town—until tonight. They never needed any guards here. They never expected you to live long enough to get here. But I knew! I always knew you'd come some time."

Glancing over his shoulder, Hatfield saw the crowd dispersing. Men were lugging off the two bodies, then Seagrave and Edley were coming along the street after them. Two more running figures appeared in the background, the stocky Bouchard and tall Travers, disheveled from bed and hastily dressed, carrying their gun-belts in their hands as they ran to overtake Seagrave and Edley.

Four fine men behind him, and only two enemies left ahead. The odds in this game had changed remarkably. But Hatfield meant to take these last two himself.

"Would you trust me to go in first and talk to my father?" Dolores Cristobal asked. "I could send Castro out to you, on some pretext. That would make it man to man, at least. If you won't send your men after him."

"I'll take Castro," said Hatfield. "There's something between us to settle. It was there the minute we first laid eyes on one another. An odd thing."

"Perhaps I could persuade my father to surrender, Jim. He'll be all alone—if you get Castro. Even if you shouldn't, your men will. Father won't have a chance, and maybe he'll listen to me."

"You can try it, senorita," said Hatfield. "I'd rather have it out with Castro alone, before seeing your father."

"I wish you'd let your men handle him," the girl said.

"No, he's mine," Hatfield said. "I knew he was mine the moment I saw him in your house at San Antonio."

"But it's senseless to give up your advantage and meet him on equal terms. Especially when he's such a genius with a gun."

"It's got to be that way—Castro and I," Hatfield insisted. "You work on your father, tell him the place is surrounded. When you hear the guns, tell him that means Castro is dead."

"I only hope it'll be true!" breathed Dolores.

HATFIELD smiled, almost boyishly. "So do I," he drawled. "And I reckon it will be, Dolores."

"And those others are really dead? Madera, Raskam, Cervantes, Linchan, and Ortega?"

"They are," Hatfield said. "That ought to help convince Don Cristobal, too. And tell him that Travers escaped and a dozen more of his men are dead in that mountain hideout."

"That many?"

"Well, approximately that many, dead or wounded," Hatfield compromised. "But you want to make it strong, don't you?"

"Yes, yes," Dolores agreed. "I'll make it even stronger than that. And that little man is Chief of all United States marshals? I'll use that also."

"Use everything you can, senorita."

"But if he's arrested, can he escape a death penalty?"

Hatfield considered this uncomfortably. "I don't like to say this, and I can't promise anything, naturally. But I think he'd be judged insane, and avoid the death sentence on that ground."

She shuddered violently. "Horrible! But better than death. I could visit him anyway. And he's rational enough in most matters."

"Yes, I'm sure he is. It's just that silver mine fixation."

She looked up at him with brilliant black eyes. "You are full of surprises, Jim Hatfield. I never expected a Ranger to speak like such an educated man."

"I was exposed to a little higher education," Hatfield said casually. "Just enough learning to be dangerous, I reckon."

Dolores laughed softly. "Dangerous, all right. You could be as dangerous to women as you are to men." She sighed. "But I guess you are not interested, senor."

"It's not exactly that," Hatfield drawled. "I'm just too busy."

"Some day you may regret it," she said gravely. "No violin music, no moonlight and roses in your memories. Nothing but

men and guns and horses, gunpowder instead of perfume."

"Maybe you're right," Hatfield conceded. "And maybe there'll be time enough for the other things when a man's too old for guns and horses."

"I hope you find it so, Jim Hatfield. But some men don't live that long. And others never grow too old for the gun and the saddle, it seems."

CHAPTER XII

Wind-up in Wichita

THE WALLED HOUSE was before them now, whitewashed with moonlight. It resembled, on a smaller scale, the Cristobal residence in San Antonio, although this building stood apart from the community. The gate here was open and unattended, another variance from the original, and the walk was bordered with tulip trees instead of groomed shrubbery.

Faint lamplight glimmered within the silent interior of the fieldstone structure. Moonbeams poured over the adobe walls and washed the yard with silver light.

Hatfield and Dolores withdrew from the gateway, and waited for the others to come up, so Hatfield could explain the procedure.

Seagrave made the only comment, "I hope you know what you're doing, Jim," when Hatfield told them that Dolores was going in to try and talk her father into giving himself up, and that Hatfield was going to face Castro alone inside the walls, when the girl told him one of the boys wanted to see him out front.

"You can trust me," Dolores told the Ranger, holding out her hand.

Hatfield gripped it briefly. "I'm not worrying about you, Dolores."

"Why risk your life on Castro, Hatfield?" protested Seagrave.

"We're pledged to it, Castro and I," said Hatfield. "I want you boys to stay out of it."

Bouchard spat explosively. "If he should plug you by accident, Jim, is it all right for us to throw down on him? Or had we ought to just slap his wrist a mite?"

Hatfield grinned and tweaked Bouchard's fiery whiskers. "Sarcasm doesn't become you, Red."

"No fooling, Jim," muttered Fox Edley. "I know you're good, but this Castro's pure hellfire with a Colt. It ain't worth the chance, Jim, when we've got him cold here."

"It is to me, Fox," Hatfield said simply.

Milt Travers smiled. "Burn him down quick, Jim. I want to get back to bed."

Dolores left them and went through the gate and up the walk, her steps light and quick on the flagstones. Hatfield watched her disappear into the house, lifted his hand to the others and moved inside the walls, drifting at once into the deep shadows of the tulip trees.

He walked through them and crossed the lawn to the shade of the wall, planning to call his man from there so they could both step forth into the moonlight with no advantage on either side. He doubted if Castro would resort to any trickery. The man was too proud, too sure of himself and his skill.

The tension built up in Hatfield as he waited there, recalling how Castro had some quality that started icy prickles along the spine. It was probably foolish to do it this way, but Hatfield knew no other way would satisfy himself at all. There had been a challenge between them from the beginning, and the only solution was this duel to the death. It was as if they were born enemies from another world or lifetime, the mutual hatred bone-deep in them, poison in their blood and brains.

Hatfield breathed deeply of the sweet night air, rubbing his palms on his trousers, easing the guns in their sheaths. He was tired but alert, senses keened to a razor sharpness, his mind cold and clear, his muscles quick and responsive.

It was an old story, but never an easy one. There was an emptiness in his stomach, a quivering of the leg muscles, tautness across the back, and dryness in the

mouth. Somewhere a mockingbird sang with heart-breaking sweetness, and Hatfield saw a new beauty in the soaring moon and swarming stars overhead.

The front door opened and Castro stood silhouetted in the lamplight from within, slender and handsome in the customary black garb, a white scarf at his throat, the ivory gun-handles white on his lean flanks. His bare head gleamed like bronze in the light, unnatural above the darkness of his fine-chiseled features, and his strange golden eyes swept the courtyard as he closed the door and started down the walk.

HE MOVED fluidly, without effort, the black panther in human guise, a perfect blend of grace and power.

"Over here, Castro," called Hatfield.

"Ah, the Ranger," said Castro, as if expecting the visit. "I know the voice, but I don't see the man. I didn't think you'd lay a gun on me from cover, senor. Not the great Hatfield."

"I haven't drawn," Hatfield said. "I won't until you're ready. Step through the tulips into the open, Castro, and I'll move out to meet you."

"That is better," Castro said, smooth and rich as silk. "That is more like the man I hoped to face one day. And so it comes, but at night, Ranger."

"You can surrender if you like, Castro. Your renegade chieftains and most of your men are dead, and this place is surrounded. You can't win, Castro."

"I can at least have the privilege and pleasure of seeing you die first, Hatfield," said Castro, unperturbed. "I think you lie, but no matter. At the moment I'm interested only in this meeting."

He moved through the line of trees and out into the moonlight. Hatfield stepped forward from the wall and faced him across forty feet of turfed lawn. Hatfield had to admire the poised coolness of this man. No surprise, no alarm, no fear in him. There was something inhuman about Castro. It gave him a certain advantage.

"Is the range too far?" Castro inquired pleasantly.

"Any way you want it," Hatfield said. "This moonlight is deceiving, you know."

"Move in closer then."

They paced forward until thirty feet separated them, and Castro's laugh rose musically. "Mainly I want to see your face, Ranger. The look on it when the bullets strike you. The emotions uncovered by the lead. Surprise and fear, perhaps? Anger and disgust? A mingling of them all, who knows?"

"You talk too much, Castro," said Hatfield.

"Ah, I know. You are the strong silent Anglo-Saxon type, Hatfield. The garrulity of the Latin annoys you. Talk is for women, isn't it, Ranger? Action is for men."

"Let's get to it."

Castro laughed again. "No finesse, you gringoes. No sense of the finer things." In the midst of his laughter, the beauty of a dark, fallen angel on his face, Castro's hands flicked to the ivory-handled guns in a blur of speed.

Jim Hatfield was moving with him, the right hand alone, firm in his conviction that a single-handed draw could shade the double, other things being equal. His gun streaked an upward arc, level and lined while Castro's were still rising, and flame leaped from it a split-second before Castro's twin explosions rent the night with thunder.

Hatfield's shot smashed Castro's left arm at the shoulder and turned him enough to pull both barrels out of line. Hatfield felt the scorching suction of lead on his right cheek, but he stood unhit while Castro's left arm dangled useless, the weapon dropping from the numbed fingers.

To fire again Castro had to swivel back to his right, while all Hatfield had to do was bring his gun down from the recoil to a level plane. So it was that the Ranger's second slug ripped into the body of Castro, beating him backward and jerking his right hand so the shot blared high and wide past Hatfield's left shoulder.

Bent like a man with stomach cramps

and lurching on splayed, jittering legs, Castro shook his fine bright head and fought to bring his gun to bear. Hatfield threw down once more from the kick-up, and fire bellowed red-and-yellow from the muzzle.

The jolting impact straightened Castro, stiff and taller than normal for an instant. Sloughing into a half-spin, Castro walked blindly off at an erratic angle, taking long plunging bent-kneed strides until he pitched forward, handsome face rooting the dewy sod.

Hatfield followed and stood over him, as Castro rolled over in a dying spasm and grinned bloodily up at him.

"You—win—Ranger. Can't quite—believe it. But it—must be—true." The amber eyes went blank, the grin still frozen on Castro's face, and Jim Hatfield turned away toward the entrance of the house.

DOLORES CRISTOBAL came running out and flung herself into his arms. "Oh, thank God! You are all right, aren't you, Ranger? But my father, he won't listen to me. I can't do anything with him.

Hatfield held her away gently. "Maybe I can talk to him."

He climbed the stone steps, as Lloyd Seagrave and the other three men came along the flagstones. He was reaching for the doorknob when a muffled report jarred the interior of the house. Hatfield turned back, in time to catch Dolores, who screamed once and fell swooning toward the grass.

Lifting and supporting her, Hatfield looked at his comrades. "Reckon that does it, boys. But go in kind of careful. It could be a trick."

Seagrave led them inside, Travers and Bouchard and Edley at his heels, guns in hand. While they were gone, Dolores came to, sobbing in Hatfield's embrace. "I knew he was going to—do it! Perhaps it is best—after all. He was too proud to be in prison. Too proud—to stand the stigma—of insanity."

Hatfield held her silently, trying to express sympathy and reassuring comfort with the tender pressure of his arms and hands.

Seagrave appeared in the doorway, nodding his head.

"It's all over, Jim."

Hatfield bowed his high dark head.

Seagrave went on, "They're broken up for good now, Hatfield. And the Lipans won't be much trouble without the bandits urging them on. But Cerro del Almagre is still sacred to them. What do you say about the silver mine, Jim?"

"I say let it rest in peace," Jim Hatfield murmured. "I declare it nonexistent."

Lloyd Seagrave smiled. "I concur in every respect, Ranger Hatfield. Let that be our report when we get back to civilization then. And let us get back there as soon as possible." Seagrave saluted and withdrew to the inside.

Dolores Cristobal raised her tear-wet face and asked tremulously: "Wh-what are you going to do—with me?"

"Take you home to San Antone," sad Jim Hatfield. "Don't you worry about a thing, senorita, and try not to remember—too much. You're safe now. In the hands of Texas and the Federal Government."

Coming Next Month

RANGER'S RANSOM

Another Exciting, Fast-Moving Jim Hatfield Novel

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"Ha!" Peggy exclaimed, picking up a stone

The Double-Barreled Dilemma

WATCHING him ride along the trail from his Lazy S spread toward the little cowtown of Treetop, you could likely recall having seen prettier young men than Samuel "Sky" Sterner. But not many as tall. And, at the moment, none more worried.

You never heard nothing like it, the hot water he was in clear up to his big red ears. For one thing, an old enemy, Three-

When a gent asks the redhead who loves him to help him choose between two other gals, he asks for double trouble—at least

finger Frye, had broken jail and more than likely would come sneaking around for a crack at Sky. But a dozen times more worrisome than any sidewinder's revenge was the weighty problem on Sky's mind. A deep frown on his bony, sunburned face, a haunted expression in his gray eyes, he looked as unhappy as a gent who forgets to wear his suspenders to a square dance.

"Eeny, meeny, miney, mo," he mumbled. "Dang it all, why couldn't one of 'em be cross-eyed, or something? Why—"

"Hey, Sky," a distant voice called. Glancing up, he beheld his lifelong friend, Nuttsy Nelson, coming toward him on a galloping roan.

A lean, limber redhead with untroubled blue eyes, Nuttsy lived with his pa and ma and kid sister on the Box N Ranch. The moment he got a close look at Sky's face, he knew something was seriously wrong.

"Man," he gasped," somebody must've stole your cows!"

"Worse'n that," Sky told him gloomily. "I'm about to get married."

"What!" Nuttsy like to fell off his horse. "Married? To a woman?"

"Yeah," Sky said despondently. "To a woman."

Nuttsy mopped his clammy brow with a shaking hand. "Maybe if you was to get in outa the hot sun and—"

"It ain't the sun," Sky said, combing long fingers through his tangle of faded brown hair. It's I'm a victim of circumstances."

"Tell me, Pal," Nuttsy begged faintly.

Well, Sky told him in a somewhat unsteady voice how it was. To begin with, his spinster aunt, Sue Sterner, had up and married a gent she had known when she was a girl.

"Heard about that," Nuttsy said. "Go on."

Sighing sadly, Sky went on to explain how it was at the Lazy S since his Aunt Sue had departed. Things had really got into a stinking mess. Old Ching Ling, the cook and so-called housekeeper, did all right as long as he had some woman to prod him along. But now—why, all the Lazy S hands were yelling their heads off about the grub and the condition of the house and bunkhouse.

"Get another cook," Nuttsy advised.

"Where?" Sky demanded.

THAT HAD NUTTSY stumped. Cooks in this part of the country were as scarce as fleas on a trained seal.

Why don't you build a fire under old Ching yourself?"

"Me?" Sky swore feebly. "What do I know about cooking and housekeeping? Besides, I got other things to do. No two ways about it, Nuttsy, the Lazy S needs a woman around. Only way I can figure to get a woman to take Sue's place is to marry one."

Nuttsy was too appalled to speak.

"Always figured on getting married, sooner or later, anyway," Sky went on doggedly. "Just never got around to picking out a wife. Yesterday, I wrote down all names of the girls I know who ain't already married. Then when I thought of something I didn't like about 'em, I crossed off their names."

"Bet you didn't have no names left, huh?"

"The trouble is," Sky said hollowly, "I ended up with two names. Dorothy Quinn and Rose Young."

"Them two fat-heads! Why, I wouldn't—"

"Be careful what you say," Sky cut in darkly. "Remember you're speaking of the future Mrs. Samuel Ster—"

"What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I never was so worried in all my days—"

"I know!" Nuttsy yelled happily. "Peggy!"

Sky stared at him in horror. Peggy Nelson, Nuttsy's kid sister—why, she was a red-headed, stubby-nosed hellion. He hadn't even put her name on his list of unmarried girls. In fact, he hardly ever considered her a girl, the way she went around dressed in jeans, with her shirt tail flying in the breeze.

Last time he visited the Box N, she pushed him into the horse tank just be-

cause he happened to call her a freckled-faced runt. Mad? He could have batted her brains out for shoving him into that tank of icy water. Only she'd outrun him to the house and locked herself in the cellar.

"Look, Nuttsy", he said hoarsely, "me and you've been bosom pals for years. But Peggy—that's carrying friendship too far to ask me to marry—"

"Nobody's asking you to marry her," Nuttsy said indignantly. "I was just going to suggest that you ask her to help you choose between Rose and Dorothy."

"Ask her!" Sky laughed till he felt weak. "A kid like her? Good gosh! She wouldn't know nothing about it."

"True," Nuttsy admitted, "she's only nineteen. But when it comes to love and all that stuff, she's up on her bit. She's read everything there is on the subject. She knows all about Cleopatra and Shakespeare and all them old-time lovers."

Sky was impressed, but still doubtful.

"What you need," Nuttsy continued, now thoroughly sold on his own idea, "is a female's viewpoint. Anyway, you ain't got nothing to lose by talking to Peggy."

Sky shuddered slightly. Maybe not, but he remembered the time she'd like to scare him to death by slipping up behind him and shaking a rattlesnake rattle close to his ear. But Nuttsy was right. He did need a feminine point of view, and maybe if he kept his eyes open and didn't turn his back, he'd get by with Peggy.

"All right," he gave in. "I was going to town to see if the sheriff had heard any more about Three-finger Frye. But I reckon that can keep till later. . . .

Peggy Nelson just happened to have on a dress instead of jeans that afternoon. It was a dainty summer thing that matched her blue eyes, and it had a double row of shiny white buttons running the full length of it. Not that the buttons held anything together—they were there to look pretty.

She happened to be standing by a window when her brother and Sky Sterner rode in sight from around the corner of the horse barn. Seeing Sky, she felt her heart begin to thump like nobody's business.

ALL HER LIFE she had been pulling tricks on him to make him pay some attention to her. But the big long-legged coyote hardly knew she was alive. She tapped a small determined toe against the floor and whistled softly between her small white teeth. There must be a way, there had to be a way to make the apple of her eye realize that she was a girl—not just part of the Box N, like a gatepost.

Quickly she took a good look at herself in the mirror. Soft, bright red hair. Some freckles, but on her they looked all right. A straight nose; a wide, sweet mouth. There was nothing the matter with her that she could see; and if Sky just wouldn't say something to make her mad—

Today, she resolved firmly, I'll be nice to him, no matter what happens!"

Hey, Sis!" Nuttsy yelled at the top of his voice.

She stepped out to where Sky and her brother stood beside their mounts. She saw right off that something was wrong, and for a scared moment, wondered if Three-finger Frye had taken a shot at Sky, or something.

But Nuttsy didn't waste any time about explaining Sky's dilemma. "You see how it is, Peggy," he finished. "He's got to marry either Dorothy or Rose, but he don't know which. I figure anybody who's read all them love stories you've read ought to be able to tell him which one to grab."

Sky, the big idiot, stood blinking down at her. Her hair sure looked warm and alive in the sun. And in that flimsy dress with all them white buttons gleaming down the front, doggoned if she didn't look like a female instead of a tomboy.

But suddenly her blue eyes were blazing up at him.

"Sky," she said furiously, "you're a—" She remembered her resolution just in time and smiled sweetly. "Which do you love—Dorothy or Rose?"

That really threw Sky for a loss, but in

a minute he got back on his feet.

"Why," he muttered angrily, "do you think I'd ride all the way here to talk to you if I knew which one?"

"Ha!" Peggy exclaimed. Scowling, she picked up a stone and weighed it carefully in her hand. "I ought to—" She caught herself just in time again, let the stone fall harmlessly at her feet, and smiled like a million dollars.

But in her heart, she wasn't smiling. Knowing Dorothy and Rose like she did, there wasn't much doubt in her mind but what Sky could take his pick. But she also knew something else—she was crazy about him herself. Always had been. And now he was all steamed up over Dorothy and Rose. But since he didn't know which girl he wanted to marry, he certainly couldn't want either one very bad. The thing to do, Peggy guessed, was stall for time and put in a few good licks for herself.

"This," she said, "may take weeks to decide."

"I can't wait," Sky said worriedly. "In another week, I won't have a cowboy left on the Lazy S."

Well, Peggy figured maybe she could help him some. She'd ride over to the Lazy S each day and build a fire under Ching Ling and see that things got cleaned up and that the boys had something to eat besides burned beans and soggy potatoes. In the meantime, Sky was to get better acquainted with Dorothy and Rose.

"The way to do that," she said, looking as innocent as a week-old infant, "is for you and Nuttsy to double-date the girls. You boys can take turns until you make up your mind.

Riding away from the Box N toward the town of Treetop, Sky couldn't get over how helpful Peggy had been. Nuttsy didn't have anything much to say. He just stared gloomily into space and wished he hadn't got himself mixed up in this romance business.

In town, Sky had a talk with Sheriff Combs. Nope, the sheriff said, nothing more had been heard of Three-Finger Frye.

"But," he added worriedly, "if I was you, the jasper who caught him stealing cows and turned him over to the law, I'd sure keep my ears and eyes open for trouble."

"That skunk better stay away if he don't want to get hurt," Sky blustered. But down inside, he was a mite perturbed. After the judge had passed sentence, Three-finger had made some mighty potent threats about what he'd do to Sky if he ever had the chance.

UPON LEAVING town, Sky and Nuttsy headed straight for the Quinn ranch, and Sky dated Dorothy up for himself for the Saturday night dance. Dorothy was a tall, slim girl with black hair, dark eyes and a merry laugh. She was all right.

The two Romeos went on to the Young ranch. Rose, blonde and blue-eyed and as pretty as a dish of whipped cream, smiled coyly at Nuttsy and like to scare him to death. So Sky finally had to make the date for him.

Riding away from the Young ranch, red-headed Nuttsy mopped his clammy face and cussed. "Wisht I was dead," he kept mumbling.

"Stop beefing, Sky growled. "All you got to do is dance with 'em. I got to marry one or the other!"

Sky arrived home just at sundown and found everybody happy and the house as clean as a new Sunday shirt.

Ching Ling smiled toothlessly and explained how Peggy had drifted along and helped him plan and do the day's work.

"Velly fine fimmale," he added. "Yes, indeedie!"

"That ain't the half of it," Curly Curtis, the foreman piped up. Curly had lost all his hair ten years ago, and his head looked something like a reddish-brown bowling ball. "Sky, you couldn't find no better girl to marry for a wife if you looked a million years."

"Wife!" Sky was suddenly fit to be tied. "You let me pick my own wife," he yelled, "since I'm the one who's got to marry her!"

He stalked into the kitchen and discovered that Ching had kept some of Peggy's cooking warmed for him. He tasted a biscuit warily. Nothing wrong with it. He plowed into the rest of the grub. He ate until he couldn't hardly draw a long breath before he shoved back from the table.

"See what I mean?" Curly said from the doorway.

Sky threw the coffee pot, but Curly ducked and ran.

A couple days passed, with Peggy riding to the Lazy S and making things hum. Clean sheets appeared on the beds. The curtains got washed and ironed. The floors began to shine. But Sky, the big boob, had a good deal on his mind and wasn't as appreciative as he might have been.

For one thing, he was still stewing about Three-finger Frye and expecting to see him pop up from behind every tree and bush. Also, trying to decide between Dorothy and Rose kept him in a constant sweat. Then, on top of all this, he suddenly found himself mixed up in a cattle deal.

Saturday morning, Barrel-head Bosey, a buyer from Kansas City, drifted along and said, "Give you two thousand for them steers on your south range. Cash on the barrel-head!"

"Ain't enough," Sky dickered. "Make it twenty-five."

Barrel-head cussed and ranted and allowed he'd druther drop dead than pay that much for them dad-burned bony steers. Then he climbed into his buggy and drove away.

You never knew for sure about Barrel-head; maybe he'd meet your price, maybe he wouldn't. Only thing you knew was that once he decided to buy, he would plunk down the cash money.

That Saturday night, Sky and Nuttsy took the girls to the dance. Everything went fine, except that now and then Sky had to run Nuttsy down and make him dance with Rose.

On the way home from the dance, they made dates for Sunday night. This time, it was to be Sky and Rose, Nuttsy and Dorothy. The girls didn't mind switching partners in the least, for they were tickled to death to think they'd suddenly become so popular. It would have likely been a different story if they'd known that Sky was trying to pick one for a wife and that Nuttsy was going along more or less as a chaperon, even if he didn't know it.

However, Nuttsy knew one thing for sure. He was a mighty sad hombre and allowed the pace would kill him. Besides, this first date had cost him a buck and a half.

"That Rose Young," he complained to Sky, "can eat like a horse. She et almost half as much as I did."

WELL, a strenuous week of romancing followed, and by the time it was over, not only was Sky worn to a frazzle from being up every night, but he was also more confused than ever.

"Doggone it all, Peggy," he growled, "I can't find nothing wrong with either one of them girls. And that dim-witted brother of yours ain't no help at all. If he would only marry one of 'em so's to eliminate—"

"Don't forget," Peggy cut in sweetly, "you're the one who wants a wife, not Nuttsy. He's just doing you a favor by helping you keep both girls happy."

Frowning worriedly, he looked at her more closely. She looked neat and clean and downright pleasant to have around the house, even if she was just a rattlebrain. Once he got married to Rose or Dorothy, and Peggy quit coming to the Lazy S, the old house was going to seem pretty dismal. Sighing, he turned his mind again to the problem of Rose and Dorothy.

"Sometimes," he muttered, "it seems to be a question of whether I'd druther have blonde-headed or black-headed kids in my family."

"Did you ever consider having some redheads?"

Sky gave her a pitying look. 'Don't be a idiot," he said. "There ain't no redheads among the Quinns or the Youngs."

For a minute, she considered knocking some sense into him with the stove poker. But she remembered she was a lady, and didn't.

A few days later, Peggy shyly suggested maybe he ought to let Rose and Dorothy take turns coming to the ranch for daily visits. "They ought to get used to things here," she said. Also, she seemed to hold to the belief that seeing them against this familiar background would help Sky make up his mind.

"Just let me know a day ahead so I won't be here, she added. "I wouldn't want to make the girl jealous."

"Oh, you wouldn't have to worry about that," Sky said kindly. "Nobody would be jealous of you.'

"Sky Sterner," Peggy blazed, picking up a heavy iron skillet, "I ought to—" But she remembered in time that she intended to rope and brand him for herself. She certainly didn't want to marry a punch-drunk or a cripple. So she gently returned the skillet to the stove and forced herself to smile.

Well, after giving the matter some thought, Sky decided to take her advice about bringing the girls to the ranch for a visit. If he'd known that Curly Custer, Soapy Ringle and the rest of his hands, including Ching Ling, had already voted in favor of Peggy for mistress of the Lazy S, he likely wouldn't have considered it. But not knowing, he first asked Rose to spend a day at the Lazy S.

"Like to know what you think of my home and the boys," he mumbled.

Rose pricked up her ears at that and looked at him searchingly out of her big blue eyes. This double-dating business between Sky and Nuttsy had led her to believe that the boys were giving her the old run-around. And she was about fed up with it. But now—well, being invited to the Lazy S—she felt a glow of excitement.

"Thanks, Sky," she said warmly. "I'd love to visit your ranch."

He went after her on a Wednesday morning. Boy, she looked pretty with the sun turning her hair to gold; and Sky figured she surely was the right one.

But everything went wrong at the ranch that day. Ching Ling, without Peggy to prod him along, got up a dinner that a hungry coyote wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. And the Lazy S cowhands, they were downright disgusting, and their table manners were something awful. Sky had to tell Soapy four times to take off his hat at the table.

Then to cap the climax, Curly Custer said that Ching Ling's peach cobbler reminded him of fifteen dollars' worth of baled ragweeds, which wasn't far from the truth. But Ching didn't take kindly to the remark and picked up the butcher knife. For a minute, it looked like somebody might get killed.

LUCKILY, Rose wasn't very hungry that day. Also, she was used to cowboys. So even if she did take everything calmly, Sky was glad when the day had ended and he had returned her home safely. Needless to add, he was some disappointed in the way things had gone at the ranch and thought maybe Rose wasn't the right girl, after all.

The following week, he screwed up his courage once more and this time invited Dorothy to the ranch.

Imediately Dorothy gave him a suspicious look out of her dark eyes. But on second thought, she realized that the invitation might be a turning point in what—to her, at least—seemed a most peculiar and uncertain courtship divided between Sky and Nuttsy Nelson. Not that she had anything against Nuttsy, except that if a girl didn't keep a tight hold on him at a dance or a party, she was likely to lose him. So Dorothy cast suspicion aside and accepted the invitation.

Dark and lovely, she looked wonderful in a fluffy white summer dress the morning when Sky went after her. Feeling a faint stir of warmth, he figured that at last he had found the right girl to become the future Mrs. Sterner. But from the moment they arrived at the Lazy S, nothing went right.

It seemed that somebody had forgot to shut off the windmill, and water had run all over the driveway, turning it into a muddy mess. Then one of the cowhands happened to ride by at a fast clip and

splashed mud on Dorothy's white dress. Ching Ling offered to clean the mud off, but he was as clumsy as a chair with a busted leg and like to ruined her dress before Sky had sense enough to stop him.

The dinner wasn't nothing to write home about, either, and the cherry pie looked like it had been baked in the open fire instead of in an oven. But the boys didn't make no nasty comments—Sky had warned them ahead of time to keep their big mouths shut, or he would bust a few heads wide open. Ching Ling managed to serve the grub without spilling the gravy down Dorothy's neck, and Soapy Ringle didn't have to be told but twice to take off his hat.

But even then, you could hardly say the meal was a successful and harmonious occasion. That went for the entire day, too.

The boys were a surly lot, quarreling among themselves. Curly Custer took a notion to sing duets with Dorothy, and there wasn't no stopping him without getting downright fistic about it; and Sky didn't want to start a fight with company around. But Dorothy was a good sport and took things as they came, even if it did kind of get her goat when she sat down on bacon drippings that Ching had more or less accidently spilled on the piano stool.

By evening time, Sky was just as glad to get shed of Dorothy as he had been glad to take Rose home. And he was more confused than ever about which one he should marry.

The next morning, he hung around the house, waiting impatiently for Peggy to arrive. By and by, she showed up, riding her spotted pony. She had on the blue dress with all those gleaming white buttons and looked as pretty as a field of morning glories.

Sky told her that Dorothy's visit had proved to be as disappointing as Rose's had been. Peggy said she was so sorry it had worked out that way. But when he wasn't watching, she winked at Ching Ling, who grinned like a toothless monkey and winked back.

"I hear tell there's a woman over in Osage who can look at the stars and tell you what to do," Sky mumbled. "Maybe I ought to go have a talk with her about Rose and Dorothy."

For a minute, Peggy had a notion to bat him over the head with the broom and see if she could knock some sense into him. And maybe she would have, only at that moment, Barrelhead Bosley, the cattle buyer, came rattling up in his buggy.

"Had another look at them steers, Sky," Barrel-head said. Pulling a huge roll of bills from a pocket, he counted out twenty-five hundred dollars and slapped it down on the front porch steps. "There you are, son, cash on the barrelhead. I'll have my men pick up them critters this afternoon."

SKY gathered up the bills and stuck them into a desk drawer—couldn't leave 'em on the front porch.

"You better take that money to the bank," Peggy said.

But with Rose and Dorothy on his mind, he didn't pay no attention to Peggy. Heavens to Betsy, he'd been running around all hours of the night for three weeks and didn't no more have his mind made up than nothing.

Right after dinner, Sky saddled his bronc and rode out to his south range to help Barrel-head cut out the steers and make sure the buyer didn't accidently run off with a few cows and calves. Not that Barrel-head wasn't honest—he just got a mite careless at times.

Two-thirds of the afternoon had passed when Sky returned to the Lazy S. He noticed right away that nobody seemed to be around and that most of the saddle ponies were gone. But not worrying about it, he hurried to the house, thinking maybe there was a piece of Peggy's apple pie left over from dinner. Stepping through the door, who should he see sitting in the big armchair but his Aunt Sue!

"Sky, you bum!" she yelled, jumped to her feet and pounded him on his back like he was a drum. "I just had to come back and see how things were going on the Lazy S, now that Peggy Nelson's took

over. Looks like I ain't been missed."

Sue had been like a mother and a big sister to him ever since he could remember. He gave her a big smack on the cheek and told her she looked wonderful, which was the truth.

"Where is everybody?" Sue wanted to know. "Yelled my head off, but nobody answered. So I just sat down to wait."

Come to think of it, Ching should be around some place. Peggy, too. Sky suddenly felt uneasy and said maybe they ought to look around.

After a hasty search, they found old Ching in the woodshed, hogtied and gagged. Sky cut him loose and helped him to his feet.

At first Ching was so excited he couldn't keep from talking English and Chinese all at the same time. But at last, he made himself understood.

Sheriff Combs and his deputy, Ching said, had come riding to the Lazy S with the news that they were close on Three-finger Frye's trail. Right away, the Lazy S hands dropped whatever they were doing and joined the chase. Shortly after that Peggy decided to leave for home, since there wasn't anything much to do the rest of the day. So she hustled out to the horse barn to saddle her pony.

It couldn't have been five minutes after that when Three-finger Frye walked into the kitchen with a gun in his fist. It seemed he'd put a fast one over on Sheriff Combs, sending him clear to the other end of the county on a wild-goose chase.

Three-finger had seen Barrel-head and his men going after the steers on the south range. He knew how the buyer always paid cash. So figuring to get some revenge and a wad of money at the same time, he hid in the timber near Blue Creek, waited until the Lazy S boys rode away with the sheriff, and then came sneaking to the ranchhouse.

After the outlaw had made Ching show him where the money was, he'd batted the little Chinese over the noggin. When Ching woke up, he'd found himself tied up in the woodshed.

What about Peggy? Had she met up with Three-Finger? Ching didn't know. All he knew was that she'd gone to saddle her pony just before the sidewinder walked in on him.

Right then, Sky Sterner had a cold, hollow feeling hit him in the pit of the stomach. But it wasn't the loss of the money that made him feel that way. He rushed to the barn and took a look around. Peggy's pony was gone. And there, lying in the sun, gleaming like new snow on a fence post, was a white button. It had been torn off Peggy's blue dress!

That really scared him. He made a circle like a hound dog sniffing for a lost trail and picked up a pair of horse tracks leading southward.

HE HADN'T followed the trail a quarter-mile before he found another white button. He guessed how it must be. Three-fingers had kidnaped Peggy, and Peggy was leaving a trail of buttons for him to follow.

The trail angled into a stretch of rock-hard ground. For a minute, Sky didn't know which way to turn. Then he found more buttons leading to the east.

After a time, he came out into a sandy gully and again picked up the horses' tracks. When that trail ended, he found a couple more buttons to show him the way.

But as time passed, and the sun dropped lower and lower, his fear grew. Three-fingers hadn't taken Peggy along just to have someone to visit with, that was for sure. He had taken her for a hostage, and if he found somebody on his trail, there was no telling what he would do to the girl.

By the time Sky reached the pines along the foothills, he was a badly frightened young man. If anything should happen to Peggy—why, he'd known the kid all her life! She was like one of his own family. Come to think about it, she was wonderful; and he must have been crazy or blind or just plain dumb not to have realized how much she meant to him. Yes, sir, he was a mighty scared hombre.

At the edge of the timber, he again lost the trail. But another white button set him right. Then, hearing the sound of ap-

proaching horses, he slid to the ground and pulled his gun.

It was Peggy, riding her spotted pony as pert and healthy-looking as you please. And leading the way wtih a rope around his scrawny neck and his hands tied behind his back was Three-finger Frye. He looked mighty unhappy.

Seeing Sky, Peggy reined up, grinned and shook back her bright red hair.

"Saw this bum leaving the house with his pockets bulging," she said. "Knew he'd stolen your cattle money, so I finished saddling my pony and followed him. Thought I might need help—that's why I left a trail of buttons for you to follow. But when he stopped to build a fire and make some coffee to drink as he ate the apple pie he'd stolen, I just slipped up on him and bounced a rock off his ugly head. You see—"

She went right on talking, but Sky didn't hear a word. He was staring at her as though she'd sprouted two heads. She held the roll of money toward, him, but he didn't even see it. He couldn't see anything but the way the sun glinted on her hair, and how her blue eyes twinkled at him, and—

Man alive, he was so glad she was unharmed that he wanted to yell at the top of his lungs for joy!

But he couldn't yell to save his soul. He just barely had enough strength to put his arms around her and sputter, "No wonder I couldn't make up my mind, when all the time I wanted red-headed kids instead of blondes and dark ones."

That wasn't no way for nobody to propose to a girl. But in this case things worked out all right. They had a nice home wedding on the Box N and then spent a big hunk of the cattle money for new furniture and a wedding trip.

Only person who had any trouble was Nuttsy. Having Sky marry his sister left him with two girls on his hands, and it like to drove him crazy, trying to figure out which one he ought to marry, now that he'd got used to both of them. But luckily, Rose met a traveling man from Denver and eloped.

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If this gun of Lynde's was such a good-luck piece, Joe Sanders wondered why he'd stopped a bushwhack bullet

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

The Legend of Lynde's Luck

JOE SANDERS finished currying the roan, wiped his brow and squatted on his heels at the door of the livery stable for a smoke. The Arizona sun soaked Yavapai Wells in its heat so that few people ventured out on the streets. Joe glanced at the yellow sky. Country sure needed the rain. The drought had hung on for months. The cattle were poorly and tempers were short.

But he grinned with satisfaction at the new sign hanging in front of the stable: Lynde and Sanders Livery Stable.

He slanted his hat over his eyes and smoked slowly. He felt as though he had a place to settle in after years of wandering. A small strike in the Mazatzals had bought out half of Ma Lynde's livery stable. It was a good business and a good town. To top it all there was Lucy Lynde, Ma's only offspring, and perhaps the best reason for Joe's happiness.

Joe got up and then spat. Lucy was walking with Frank Fraser toward the Lynde cottage across the wide dusty street. Frank had staked a claim on Lucy. No one else in Yavapai Wells had trifled with that claim. Frank had a reputation for speed and accuracy with the staghorn-handled forty-four Colt he carried tied down on his thigh. Joe hurriedly went back to work. Fraser was the joker in the deck. But there was no use worrying about it now. There was work to be done.

It was dark by the time he finished. Ma Lynde drove her buggy into the stable. She glanced about the stable and smiled. "Looks like Charlie was back at work here. You sure do a good job of work, Joe."

Joe nodded. "It's a good business, Ma."

"I did the best I could with hired help for the ten years since Charlie died. But it ain't like having a partner. Charlie and I were good partners. I worked alongside him like any man."

Joe kept quiet. When Ma talked about Charlie Lynde she wasn't making conversation. It was an outlet for her grief. Lucky Charlie had been the sheriff. He had been drygulched in the San Franciscos by rustlers. His blinding speed with the sixgun and his phenomenal luck had done him no good. Joe had heard the story a hundred times.

"You're pretty quiet, son. You and Lucy have a spat?"

"Ain't seen her since breakfast, Ma. She's been out with Frank Fraser again."

"The more fool you. She likes you, Joe."

Joe grunted. "Seems to like him a lot more."

"Him? He has the edge because she's lonely and because that jasper has run everybody else off. Give him a run for his money, why don't you, Joe."

Joe finished unhitching Ma's sorrel from the buggy and led it into a stall. "It ain't as easy as that. He's a trouble-maker."

"Ain't no more of a man than you."

"True. But I don't pack a sixgun unless I have to use it. I seen too many good men shot down because some hombre like Fraser egged them into a fight."

Ma looked at him sharply in the lamplight. She shrugged and went to the door. "Bill Kelly over to the Circle Y promised delivery on those three horses we wanted for hiring out."

"Get a good deal?"

"You know me. Best get done here and come over to the house. I'll tell you about it at supper. Lucy promised apple pie for tonight."

As Joe crossed the street to the cottage he suddenly remembered he hadn't eaten any lunch. Steak and potatoes would go good topped off by a slab of Lucy's flaky pie.

FRANK FRASER looked up from the table as Joe came in the back door, his hair still wet and slick from its combing.

"Kinda spruced up, Joe? Going anywhere?"

Joe wished he had turned down Ma's invite. But it was too late now. The table was set for four. Lucy turned from the stove, her oval face flushed from the heat. She was pretty and the apron Joe hoped to see her wear in his kitchen some day set off her trim figure.

"Hungry, Joe?" she asked.

"Forgot to eat lunch, Lucy."

Frank grinned. "What are you and Ma going to do with all your money, Sanders?"

Ma came into the kitchen. "I'm saving mine. I hope Joe saves his for his marriage."

Frank glanced at Lucy. "Any prospects, Joe?"

Joe shook his head and sat down. Frank was a head taller than Joe but not as heavy in the body. His smooth black hair

and clean-shaven face set him off from the men of Yavapai Wells. Frank always had money. At times he ran the faro game in the Butte Saloon when he wasn't sitting in the lookout chair. People claimed he owned a share of the Butte and that old Ed Parker was really an employee instead of the boss. Anyway he ran things pretty much his own way in there.

Joe didn't waste any time getting out of the house when supper was over. His conversation suffered in comparison to Frank's but what galled Joe was Frank's unconcern about Joe as a rival.

"Joe!" It was Ma Lynde sitting in her old rocker on the front porch. "You're leavin' early."

"Long day, Ma. Got to get some sleep."

She rocked silently for a time. Lucy's laughter came to them above the rattle of the dishes being washed. "You ain't putting up much of a fight, Joe."

"She seems happy."

"She's young. There ain't many eligibles in the Wells. She can't wait her whole life for a mulehead like you to talk up."

"You think I got a chance?"

Ma snorted. "She was the one talked me into taking you into the business."

"You said you needed the money and that no one else would invest in the business."

"I had enough money. But I liked your looks. I won't live forever. I'd like to see the name of Lynde still on it after I'm gone. Charlie would have liked that. I figured Lucy would be a good partner for you like I was to her pa."

"I wouldn't want her to shovel manure."

"Damn it! She wouldn't have to. She'll get my money. You can hire good help. A man could keep 'em humping where a woman couldn't."

"Sounds good but she ain't interested in a plain shirt like me, Pa. See you in the mornin'."

Joe stopped by the Butte for a few hands of poker. It was a weakness, he admitted, but he usually won more than he lost and he never got into a steep game. Playing cards was about the only way he developed any luck. Joe left the game at eleven. The bar was crowded as he passed on his way to the door.

"You want a drink, Joe?"

IT WAS Frank Fraser leaning easily on the bar with some of his friends. Joe nodded and Frank slid the bottle to him. "Ma said you were going to bed early. Ma working you too hard?"

One of the men laughed. "She's a real whip. Worked for her for a spell. She keeps you sweatin'."

"I own half the place. She ain't my boss."

"She's still the boss, amigo. Aims to see Lucy set up pretty well when she passes on."

Frank grinned. "Maybe Joe figures on that. Too bad Lucy can't see through Ma like the rest of us. Ma thinks Joe ought to hitch up with Lucy."

Joe was usually slow to anger. But Frank's words stung him. Joe had been accused of being yellow more than once because he took things slow. Usually by the time he figured he had been insulted the time for action was gone.

"That right, Joe?" Frank was actually laughing at him now. Quite a few of the men at the bar were silently watching Joe.

Joe downed his drink and wiped his mouth. "I bought into the business; not into the family. Besides I don't talk about ladies at the bar."

The shot went home. Frank's eyes narrowed. He picked up the fine leather gloves he usually wore and drew them through his left palm. He slapped them against the open palm. "Meaning we shouldn't either?"

"I didn't say that. Suit yourself."

The gloves smacked against Joe's face. The tip of a finger flicked against his left eye. He stepped back quickly. Tears flowed from the stinging eye. He reached in his hip pocket for his bandanna. Frank's Colt rammed viciously into his belly.

"Don't you draw on me, Sanders!"

Joe jerked his hand from his pocket. The saloon was deathly quiet. Chairs scraped back. Joe forced himself to speak

calmly. "I ain't lookin' for trouble, Frank. Just reachin' for a bandanna."

"Get out of here before I go to work on you. Get out and stay out. You come in here again and I'll know you want a fight. And keep out of Lucy's kitchen too."

Joe turned and walked slowly to the door. Someone laughed. It started a gale of laughter that followed him down the street to his room in the livery stable. He undressed and lay for a long time staring into the darkness. It was time to move on. He had always played a lone game. The setup in Yavapai Wells had been perfect for him until Fraser had taken over. The usual joker in the deck. Frank always had treated him like a fool. Maybe Lucy had passed a remark that had caused Frank to think otherwise. Maybe it had been Ma. She was first rate but damned blunt in speaking her mind. Whoever had done it had timed it well.

JOE kept to himself the next few days. He worked long hours and refused Ma's supper invitations. He saw Lucy riding with Frank. Trust Frank to tell the story in full detail to her.

Ma cornered Joe late one afternoon. "So he finally worked his bluff on you."

"I wouldn't say that."

"You're the one exception in Yavapai Wells then."

Joe looked up quickly. "What do you mean?"

"It's all over town. He's barred you from Lucy, my house and the Butte. Some social life you have, son."

Joe walked to the door of the stable and leaned against the side. A gust of wind swept grit into his face. "Sure could use some rain, Ma."

She padded up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "What do you plan to do, son?"

"Sell out, I guess. You willin'?"

"Might as well. I thought you were a good man, Joe."

"You want me to get killed because of you and this business?"

"In other words you're licked without a fight."

Joe walked past her into the stable.

"Come over to the house in an hour. I'll have your money ready for you."

She walked across to the cottage. It looked cosy through the veil of dust that swept across the street. Joe touched one of the rough hewn posts that supported the stable roof. Old Charlie had built well. Probably planned for an old age in Yavapai Wells. He had pushed his luck too far. That wasn't for Joe Sanders.

Lucy opened the door silently at Joe's knock. She hurried back to the stove. She had his favorite apron on again, crisp and bright. Steaks sizzled on the stove and a huge skillet of cottage-fried potatoes was next to the steaks. The odor of steak and fresh baking filled the little kitchen. Joe waited by the door foolishly turning his hat in his big hands.

"That you, Joe?" called Ma from the sitting room.

"Yes ma'am."

She came into the kitchen and handed a large envelope to Joe. "It's all there, Joe. Want to count it?"

He shook his head and stowed it away in his shirt.

Lucy turned. "Are you sitting for supper, Joe?"

"No, Lucy. Got to pack my gear tonight."

Her hazel eyes held his for a long moment and then she looked away. "When are you leaving?"

"Figure about dawn tomorrow. I'll round up a hand to help Ma for a spell."

"Don't bother," said Ma, "I can keep it runnin' until I find the right man."

Joe shuffled his feet. "Well, might as well say goodbye now, Ma."

"Goodbye then."

"Goodbye, Lucy."

"Good luck, Joe."

"Thanks, Lucy."

Ma looked away as Joe opened the door. There was nothing more to say. Joe turned and then drew back quickly. Frank Fraser was revealed in the glow of light from the door. His thin mouth drew down at the corners. His hands rested lightily on his hips.

"WHAT are you doing here, Sanders?"

"Gettin' my money and sayin' goodbye."

"I told you to keep out of here."

"I'm leaving. I'll be out of town by tomorrow. I don't want no gunplay, Frank."

Frank glanced in the door to make sure the women heard him. "Get going then."

Joe walked miserably to the front of the house. There was no reason for Frank's remarks. He was cocky. Joe would bet his whole roll that there was a mean streak in Frank. God help Lucy when her looks began to wear away. Frank wouldn't be tied down. He'd probably wait until Ma died and then take over.

Joe packed his gear swiftly and checked his Winchester forty-four. He thrust it into its scabbard and placed it near the door. He was carrying too big a wad to take chances the next day. Word got around quick in that country.

Someone rapped on the door. It was Ma Lynde. A cold gust of wind swept in with her. She pulled the shawl from her head. "You're goin' for sure then?"

"I am, Ma."

"You'll get away from the Wells, son, and from Frank Fraser but you'll never get away from yourself."

"I don't aim to get killed."

"You ain't vellow, son. What's really troubling you?"

"I never had too much luck in my life. Every time I buck up against a good man my luck goes bad. My luck just don't run that way."

She sat on the bed for a long time staring at the floor. She looked up. "You figure it's a matter of luck then?"

"I know my luck, Ma. It ain't in the cards to buck Frank Fraser. I ain't any good to you or anyone else dead."

She got up without a word and left the room. Joe dropped on his cot and rolled a cigarette. He watched the smoke wreath up to the ceiling where it wavered crazily in the drafts sweeping through the chinks. The wind was really blowing. He closed his eyes.

"Joe! Joe!" It was Ma Lynde again. She stood beside the cot with a holstered sixgun in her hands. "I want you to have this."

"I never carry one. You know that."

"Take it. If you really love my girl you'll go down to the Butte and face Frank Fraser down."

"It's no use, Ma."

"You know why Charlie always won out? He believed in his luck. He might have been superstitious but it worked out for him. This Colt was his charm. He never went anywhere without it. Said it was his good luck."

Joe swung his feet to the floor and studied the worn walnut of the butt. It was plain, not the kind a gunman would fancy. He looked up at Ma. "How come he was drygulched then?"

Ma looked away. "It was found at a spring a mile from where he was killed. We figured it fell out of its holster while he was drinking. Anyway his good luck wasn't with him when he was dropped."

Joe nodded. A deputy-marshal he had known in Albuquerque had always sported a tiny gold nugget on his watch chain. A gambler had killed him with a derringer. The nugget had been found outside the gambling house door with a bit of broken chain still attached to it. His own father had always carried the rebel minie ball they had dug out of his leg after Gettysburg. He had claimed it was his good luck. He had lost it and been killed by a maddened horse a week later.

"Well, Joe?"

"It was Charlie's luck; not mine."

"Maybe it will change your luck."

He shook his head.

"Never figured you for a quitter."

"I ain't, damn it! Let me alone!"

"You goin'?"

"NO!" He got up and went into the stable. He leaned an arm against one of the posts and rested his head on it. He had liked it there. The smell of hay and the nitrogen smell of horses mingled with the sweet scent of good leather. He suddenly raised his head. Something pat-

tered on the roof. It was raining at last.

"Joe."

He turned.

"I'm leaving Charlie's Colt on this bale."

She walked out into the rain without another word nor did she turn her head. He saw the quick flash of light as the cottage door opened and closed. Someone's head and shoulders showed against a window. It was Lucy looking at the livery stable.

He paced back and forth and stopped beside the bale. He slid the Colt from its holster. It was the same caliber as his Winchester. The smooth walnut grip settled in his big hand as though custommade for it. He hefted the gun and spun the empty cylinder. It spun easily. Ma kept it well cleaned and oiled. The trigger pull was just right. He paced back and forth again. He wanted to see Lucy again and try to explain his reasoning but he knew it would be useless. She was like her ma and probably quite a bit like her pa too. Proud and stubborn; gritty and independent. Gutty as a thorough-bred. He'd like to see anyone try to run those two out of town. Well, it'd be the same lonely wandering life for him. A little prospecting, a little cowpunching and always the same hunger for a place of his own. Beans and sowbelly, doughy bread and wet blankets, wind driven sand and heat and cold in their turn. He'd be thinking of Ma and Lucy and of the good meals, the cheery conversation, and his work in the livery. He spun on his heel as the rain beat a wild tattoo on the roof. The drought was broken. Business would pick up. Ma would have a struggle trying to get good help.

Joe picked up his Winchester from inside the door of his room and ejected six cartridges. He loaded the Colt swiftly, buckled on the heavy cartridge belt about his lean hips and settled it. He tried it for draw, placing an empty match box on the back of his outstretched right hand and dropping his hand to draw the Colt and level it before the box hit the ground. He shook his head. It was no use. He was too slow. He had never been fast. He could shoot as well as the next man but his draw was slower than the average man's.

He put on a short jacket and lit a cigarette. He walked to the stable door and looked back into the stable as he slid it shut. A horse stamped. The lamplight shone dully on the polished brass of saddle and harness. The rain was a steady drizzle. The wind had died. He hunched his jacket collar up beneath his hat brim and set off for the Butte.

He stopped in front of the saloon. The rain streamed from the porch roof. A puncher came out of the saloon shouldering his way into a yellow slicker. He stared at Joe and spun on a heel. The door slammed behind him.

Joe waited, sucking on the last of his cigarette. At last he took it from his mouth and flicked it into a wide puddle. It hissed out. He stepped up on the porch and pushed open the door.

THE WARM air rushed about him as he stood there scanning the crowded room. Men were looking up from games and bottles at him. All the games had stopped. The player piano tinkled raggedly to the end of a tune and stopped. No one moved to start it again.

Joe looked along the bar. Men moved slowly backward, never taking narrowed eyes from him. The bartender edged to the hideout gun niche. One man stood at the middle of the long bar. It was Frank Fraser wearing a black leather jacket and a black hat tilted on the back of his head. A slim hand was closed about a full whiskey glass.

Joe walked to the end of the bar and placed his hands flat on top of it. "Whisky," he said quietly. The bartender slid down bottle and glass. Joe downed a drink and then another.

Fraser shifted. "That for the road, Sanders?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"You leaving the Wells?"

"When I'm ready."

The crowd moved farther back.

"Can you use that sixgun?"

"I've fired a few in my time." Joe was calmer than he had expected.

Fraser walked along the front of the bar wth the full whisky glass in his hand. "Sanders!"

Joe turned. The whisky caught him full in the face stinging his eyes. Instantaneously he remembered a gunfighter's trick he had seen Dallas Stoudenmire use in the Old Boss Saloon in El Paso. He ripped his hat from his head with his left hand and sailed it toward Fraser's face dropping his right hand to his Colt at the same time. Fraser flinched but the staghorn-handled Colt leaped into his hand and roared. The slug picked at Joe's left shoulder.

Joe forgot his Colt. He forgot everything but the dirty trick Fraser had pulled to get the advantage of him, a man who was far slower on the draw. Red rage flooded his brain and danced before his stinging eyes. He closed the gap between them in short plunging strides. Fraser had recocked his Colt but Joe's left hand shot down to clamp on his gun wrist. His right smashed against Fraser's jaw. The gambler bounced off the bar to be met by another blow. A right smashed into Frank's belly. He dropped his Colt and grappled with Joe. He clawed for Joe's Colt. Joe shoved him back, measured him with a left and hit him on the point of the jaw. Fraser went down sobbing in frustration.

Joe stepped back to let him get up. Fraser reached for his gun. Joe's heel came down viciously on his wrist. He reached down and dragged Fraser to his feet by the throat. He jolted him with a right and knocked him down in front of the door. Fraser tried to thrust a hand into his jacket. Joe took no chances on a hideout gun. His boot toe caught the gunman in the throat. Fraser gagged and got to his feet in time to get Joe's smashing blow over the heart.

He went back against the door knocking it open. He landed on his hands and knees on the porch. Joe pulled him off the porch and threw him into the puddle. Fraser got up groggily. Joe drove him down the street smashing at belly, heart and jaw, ignoring the blows that cut at his own face. Joe brought up one from his right thigh. Frank went down and lay still. Joe reached down to drag him up, but hands pinned his arms to his sides.

"Damn it, Sanders. He's had enough."

"You trying to kill him, you fool?"

RAIN streamed down Joe's face and his breath came hard. Fraser got up, his face plastered with red streaked mud. He dabbled foolishly at the wreck with a handkerchief. Joe threw the men aside and started for the gunman. Fraser turned and ran. Joe's foot caught him in the small of the back. He disappeared in the blackness of the street.

Joe turned. He touched his smashed mouth tenderly. "Anybody else?"

Someone laughed. "You're okay, hombre. Go on home."

Someone thrust his hat on his head. The red flames flickered out as he reached the end of the street. He stopped in front of the Lynde cottage. Someone was sitting on the porch, swathed in a poncho. It was Ma Lynde slowly rocking back and forth.

"Well?"

"I'm staying, Ma. He ain't."

"Good for you, son."

Joe touched the holstered Colt. "Never had a chance to draw, Ma. I'll clean it," he said foolishly. "It loaned me Charlie's luck. Too bad Charlie didn't have it with him in the San Franciscos."

Ma Lynde rocked faster. "He did, Joe."

"What was that?"

"They took it out of his hand when they found him. Someone beat him to the draw. His luck ran out, son. There ain't no such thing as a charm to help a man. He's got to help himself like you did tonight."

"You're an awful liar, Ma."

"Can't deny that, Joe. Go on in the house and have Lucy doctor that face."

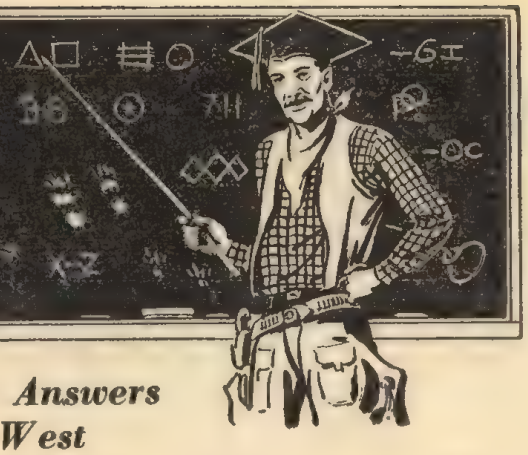
Joe reached for the door knob. "Front door, Ma?"

"You'll be one of the family soon enough. Go ahead."

Joe opened the door. The old lady chuckled. "Sure would like to see that hombre's face."

Joe grinned in spite of his damaged mouth as Lucy came to meet him.

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY



A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Sometimes in stories I read where it says a cowboy used up "all five of his cartridges" and had to reload. If he uses a six-shooter, why not *six* shots?—A.V. (Ind.)

A.—Many western gun-toters carried only five cartridges in the wheel, leaving an empty chamber under the firing pin, because an accidental hard bump on the hammer might make the gun go off when they didn't want it to. Thumbing back the hammer on a six-shooter turns the cylinder so the next cartridge comes in line with the barrel, also cocking the gun, ready to shoot.

Q.—Are the trout in your Rocky Mountain streams the same as the trout in our eastern brooks?—M.S. (Penna.)

A.—The trout native to Rocky Mountain waters are called cut-throats because of a splash of orange on the throats of the males. Unless planted in very recent years, I do not believe these trout are found in eastern streams. Rainbows, brookies, lochlevens and German browns have been planted in most Rocky Mountain streams as well as throughout the east.

Q.—Driving through the Southwest we saw so many hotels with names like Alvarado, Castañeda, Armijo, Coronado, De Vargas, Tovar, etc., it made us wonder where they came from.—Mrs. H.G.C. (Iowa.)

A.—They are named for some of the more notable Spanish Conquistadores (Conquerors) who first explored the southwest. I think the Fred Harvey Hotel System started this custom.

Q.—Who was Rattlesnake Dick?—S.L. (Wyo.)

A.—This nom de holdup belonged to a California highwayman named Dick Barter along about the 1850's.

Q.—What are some of the wild animals we would get to see on a trip through Yellowstone Park?—Mrs. J.M. (Fla.)

A.—Bears, mule deer, squirrels, chipmunks, elk (wapiti) and moose. Possibly a glimpse of porcupines, a badger, coyote, bobcat or lynx.

Q.—In pictures of Texas longhorns the horns nearly always curve upward, but those of modern white-faced bulls in stock shows all curve down. Is this just a difference in the breeds?—W.H.N. (N.Y.)

A.—No. Breeders clamp weights on the horns of their young purebred Hereford (white-face) bulls to make the horns curve down as they grow.

Q.—Where is the road called "The Going-To-The-Sun Highway"?—W.R.M. (Mo.)

A.—In Glacier National Park, Montana.

Q.—Do you think it would be safe for a couple of girls about nineteen to hitch-hike through the west?—Jean & Lena (Conn.)

A.—Just as safe as anywhere else, maybe more so, but hitch-hiking is not a safe pastime for young gals anywhere.

Q.—I once read a humorous definition of a dogie, but I can't remember it.—Mrs. G.W.K. (Ore.)

A.—Will this do: A dogie's a calf without parents or friends. He's fat in the middle and poor at both ends!

—*S. Omar Barker*

A DEAD MAN WAS

He held a murderous little twin-barreled derringer

How could a man still control things from his grave? And was it spite that made Les Scwerby risk his neck to find out? Or was it the girl?

BOSS

A Novelet by CLIFTON ADAMS

CHAPTER I

Necktie Jury

IT STARTED with a letter that came into our law office in Montelargo, in eastern Arizona. It was from somebody named Ronson, and what he wanted was for the firm of Davis, Davis, Davis and Sowerby to send a lawyer to defend Big John Breckenridge in some fracture of the statutes.

I was against it from the start. I figured if it was Big John Breckenridge, he must be guilty. And in the second place there was a lot of Indian country to cross in order to get where they were holding him, a place called Lenardo, down in the San Pedro Valley. But I was outvoted three to one by Davis, Davis, and Davis. The next morning I bought a new .45, got on the Benson stage, and headed west.

Lenardo turned out to be the county seat of Waycross county, a ragged, barren piece of land bigger than some of the states back East. The county sheriff and a couple of deputies couldn't begin to cover the whole territory. Up in the hills, in the Huashucas and the Mules and the Whetstones the outlaws kept things about the way they wanted them, and Big John Breckenridge was king.

Respect for the law was negligible in this country. I saw that as the stage passed a towering cottonwood about a mile out of town. One rugged outreaching limb of the tree was serving as a gallows arm, and from the end of a rawhide reata a man's body dangled, dancing grotesquely on air as a flight of vultures circled high overhead. It wasn't pretty. Somebody had emptied a shotgun in the man's face.

THE STAGE DRIVER looked down from his place on the box, grinning. "Jest a cow thief," he shouted pleasantly, "or maybe a deputy sheriff." Laughing, he cracked the lines over the horses and the stage ground and crunched its way down a steep slope and into Lenardo.

Lenardo was maybe a dozen frame buildings, only a year or two old but already beginning to sag with old-age. The summer heat and wind had peeled off most of the paint on the few buildings that had had paint on them to begin with. I left my bags in the stage office where a sour-faced agent told me I could find the sheriff in his office at the other end of the street, probably asleep.

I found the sheriff's office without much trouble. It was a small log and adobe box-building with a scaly sign on the door. *J. J. Hally, Sheriff. Waxcross County.* And below that, *County Jail.*

The stage agent had been right. The sheriff was asleep. All two hundred pounds of him, sitting cocked back in a swivel chair, and his spur rowels buried in the wood of a roll-top desk. He snorted as I came in.

I said, "Sheriff Hally?"

He spat on the floor, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, blinked his eyes until he brought me into focus. He took his feet off the desk, brought out a sack of tobacco and rolled a cigarette.

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm Les Sowerby," I said. "I've been hired to defend John Breckenridge in Court. I'd like to talk to him."

He just sat there, red-faced, with the thin tobacco-stained cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Then he began to laugh. It started way down in the bottom of his enormous belly and came out slowly, in big round sounds, like something coming up from the bottom of a well. I decided I didn't like the sheriff very well. And if there is a joke, I like to be let in on it.

I said, "Maybe you'd tell me what's so funny about a lawyer asking to see his client?"

He wheezed, still laughing. "Sorry, mister," he managed. "It's just that you made a hell of a long trip for nothing. If you want to talk to Big John you'll find him about a mile north of town, on the stage road. But I'm afraid he won't be able to tell you anything."

A mile north of town, on the stage road. I remembered the body in the cottonwood. It was quite a joke, all right, but not much to my liking.

I said, "You mean that's my client, the body strung up for buzzard bait?"

"It's Big John." The sheriff chuckled. "It was, that is." I thought the sheriff was going to be off again, but he managed to control himself this time. "I'll tell you how it is," he said. "Big John made a mistake of shooting a man here in Lenardo and my deputies locked him up. He was here in jail until last night when the boys heard that Big John was getting a slick lawyer from Montelargo to get him off. Well, mister, I guess they kind of took things in their own hands. They said Big John needed hanging, and no lawyer was goin' to talk them out of it. So they broke in and took him out of his cell. They say he's hangin' out north of town, but I haven't been out yet to look at it."

PROBABLY, I thought, Big John had needed hanging. But not that way. Not without a trial. I don't like lynchings of any kind, and I especially don't like them when my client is on the dangling end. I had a look around the office and saw three barred cells in the back, all of them empty. That, I guessd, was the Waycross County Jail.

I said, "I had an idea that sheriffs were supposed to protect their prisoners against lynching mobs."

"What could I do?" Sheriff Hally asked pleasantly. "They had me outnumbered."

I said, "Sure," but he didn't like the way I said it. He leaned back in his chair and looked at me, and those eyes of his were beginning to take on a pretty business-like glint.

"Look, mister," he said. "It all happened for the best. You'd only of lost the case if you'd brought it to court. Big John

didn't have a chance. What difference does it make if he hangs today or next month? Now, the best thing for you to do is to catch the next stage for Montelargo and forget about it."

"That depends," I said.

"On what?"

"Big John included a hundred dollar retainer with his request for an attorney. It depends on whether or not I figure he got his money's worth."

The sheriff eyed me carefully. "You can't help him now. You must have seen him yourself, if you came in on the stage. Do you figure you can help a man in that condition?"

I said, "That's something I haven't decided yet." I turned to go. I'd had enough of Sheriff Hally and the Waycross County Jail. They didn't set well on my stomach.

I got as far as the door before the sheriff spoke again.

"There's just one thing you'd better know," he said. "Lenardo is kind of a funny town. It doesn't take kindly to strangers that poke around in things that don't concern them. Well . . . good day, sir."

I WENT OUT and walked up the plank walk to the nearest saloon. I ordered bourbon from a big bearded bartender and he came up with a bottle and a water tumbler. It was the slack time of day and I had the bar all to myself. There were a few other customers back at the rear tables, but they were busy with the saloon girls or gambling tables. The bartender poured three fingers in the tumbler and said, "The trouble with this country is the heat. It's enough to drive a man crazy. I came from Kansas myself, and it's hotter'n hell in the summer, but we've got winters too. You come in on the Benson stage?"

"That's right."

"I remember one Kansas winter," the bartender said. "My old man had a few head of cattle. They drifted with the snow clean across Indian Territory and we found some of them in Texas the next spring. You wouldn't be Big John's lawyer, would you?"

The bartender had a way of slipping in those questions when you didn't expect them. But I nodded.

"That's right," I said again. A customer came up from the back and asked for rye. The bartender got it for him, talking all the time about that hard Kansas winter. The customer went back to sweat a poker game and the bartender came back.

"By spring," he said, "The damn critters was as wild as antelope. They had hair a foot long and you couldn't tell one brand from another with shearing them like a bunch of sheep. I'd like to talk to you tonight. In private."

"What about?" I asked.

"I'll tell you tonight, and I'll bring a friend along. Where'll you be?"

"Is there a hotel in town?"

"The Baker House, down by the stage office."

"That's where I'll be," I said. "In bed, if you don't come early. Is it something about Big John?"

But he only grinned and shook his head, which didn't mean a thing. Maybe it was a fool thing to do, meeting a stranger like that on his home ground, but the sheriff still had me worked up. Anyway, the bartender looked like a likable sort of hombre. In a dangerous kind of way. I finished the bourbon in the tumbler and left some silver by the bottle. The bartender had found something to do down at the other end of the bar. He looked busy as I walked out of the place.

CHAPTER II

Girl With a Gun

THE BAKER HOUSE was a weary-looking frame building right where the bartender said it would be. For a dollar I got a pitcher of water, a crock bowl and a key to a room. I wasn't surprised when the sour-faced stage agent brought my bags from next door and took my money.

"Room six, upstairs," he said. "You'll have to take your stuff up yourself. I have to keep an eye on the stage office."

"It looks like you've about got the tourist trade nailed down here in Lenardo," I said.

He grunted and went back to his chair in the stage office. I climbed the stairs and went down the dusty hall until I came to a room with a big 6 marked on it with white chalk, and I guessed that was to be my home away from home, as they say in the hotel business. The room had a sagging bed with a straw mattress, a cracked mirror on the wall, and a washstand. That was it. It was just big enough to change a shirt in without getting bruised.

So I did that, and washed my face, and began to feel better. Better than Big John Breckenridge, anyway.

DARKNESS came early in the Pedro valley. The sun seemed high as I slogged across the street to get some supper, but when I came out of the eating house the sun had disappeared behind the Whetstones and dusk was beginning to settle on Lenardo. I went back to my room, lit the mantle lamp and waited for my company.

It was about eight o'clock when it came. There was a knock on the door and when I opened it there was the bartender, grinning, with a business-like .45 pushed into his waist band. Behind him was another man—a slight, lean little man who seemed much too small to be carrying the two big pistols that he had strapped to his thighs. I opened the door and they came in.

The bartender said, "I'm glad you waited for us. What we've got to tell you is pretty important. It could be a matter of life or death, as they say."

The little man didn't do anything. He leaned against the door and stared into the middle space, as if he were thinking of something that had happened back in his childhood. He had an ugly, pushed-in little face, like a monkey.

Then I saw that the bartender was holding something out to me. It was a strip of paper about eight inches long, pink, with a lot of fine print on it. I recognized it as a travel ticket on the Arizona Stage Lines.

"What's that for?" I said.

"It's for you," the bartender grinned pleasantly. "That's the way stage lines are. You have to have a ticket. Seeing as how you'll be doing some traveling, we thought it would be nice to buy you one."

I began to get an uneasy feeling that I should have unpacked my .45. I said, "Thanks anyway, but I can buy my own ticket, when I decide to leave Lenardo."

The bartender shrugged. "That's just it. There's a stage leaving the first thing in the morning. That's the one we thought you ought to take."

That was putting it clear enough. Either I agreed to leave Lenardo by morning or something bad was apt to happen to me. And soon. I decided I didn't like it. You get friendly with a man and ask him up to your room to tell his troubles, and this is what happens. And another thing—why were they so anxious to get me out of town? I wasn't hurting anybody. I didn't even have a client.

The bartender waved the pink slip of paper impatiently. "Well?" he asked.

Then I made a mistake. "Use it yourself," I said. "I figure I'll stay around Lenardo a while and see what the attraction is."

The bartender smiled slightly. "You hear that, Monk? He don't want to use our ticket. He says he'll stay a while."

Monk roused himself and stretched, like a man getting ready to do a hard day's work. "Yeah," he said.

"He doesn't want to take our advice," the bartender said.

Monk sauntered across the room and stood looking up at me. "That's nearly hell," he said flatly.

The little man was fast—but I might have guessed that from the way he wore his .45's. His right hand flicked down and a pistol seemed to grow in his closed fist. He pushed the muzzle in my stomach.

"Now wait a minute, Monk," the bartender said. "There's no need to make a noise and cause the sheriff a lot of trouble, why don't we just talk to him, gentle like,

and maybe he'll come around to our way of thinking?"

Monk grunted, as if he didn't think much of the idea. He would like to put a bullet through my middle, just to hear his gun go off. There are men like that. Then the bartender got around behind me and made a grab for my arms.

I jerked back and said, "Kind of keep your goddamn hands off of me."

NOW I WAS MAD. A joke's a joke, but this one wasn't funny any longer. That was as far as I got with my thinking. Monk's gunhand snapped up and he laid the barrel of his .45 across my cheek. It was just a little tap. He wasn't even half trying. It only loosened about three jaw teeth, and broke the inside of my mouth, and caused a small explosion that seemed to lift my skull.

By the time I got my head clear again the bartender had my arms twisted behind my back. "Is that a convincing argument?" he said in my ear, "Or do you want us to talk some more?"

It would have been a great disappointment to Monk if I had given up then. He was just getting warmed up. Just beginning to enjoy himself. I thought I felt the bartender's hold relax on my arms. I jerked away suddenly, heaving forward and around to the side. That was a crazy thing to do, with a loaded .45 looking me in the face. I found out just how crazy.

Monk put his back into it this time. He used all the snap and drive he had. He stepped into it like a bare-knuckle fighter and the stakes were winner-take-all. There was a red flash, and I had a feeling that the floor had opened up and I was dumping head first into a pit that had no bottom.

I came out of it finally with the bartender standing over me, grinning, and pouring water on my face.

"See what you did? he asked pleasantly. "You made Monk mad. Now is that any way to treat a couple of friends who are trying to do you a favor?"

If they did me any more favors I wouldn't have a head left. Well, I wouldn't miss it much. I wasn't using it to think with. If I had thought, I never would have tried to argue with two men and three .45's. It was like playing against a house dealer. You couldn't win.

I sat up and spat blood on the Baker House floor. The stage agent wasn't going to like that. I ran my tongue around on the inside of my mouth and it felt like a carcass that had been butchered with a saw There was a cut just below my left ear, and blood was running off my chin and dripping all over my clean shirt.

"Are you going to take our suggestion about the morning stage?" the bartender asked.

I shook my head—just to clear it, but the bartender got the wrong idea. He grabbed my arms and jerked me to my feet again. My legs were rubber and my head felt stuffed with mud.

"We can keep this up all night," the bartender grinned, "Monk's pistol will last a lot longer than your face. How about it mister?"

Monk was hoping I'd say no. He was set to do it all over again. But I didn't have to be beaten to death to know when I'd had enough. I didn't know why they didn't want me in Lenardo, and I didn't care. I just wanted to get out.

I started to say so, but there was something wrong with my jaw, and my tongue was curled up in my mouth like a dead mouse.

"Well, mister?" the bartender said again. His good humor was beginning to leave him. Pretty soon he was going to settle down to business, and I didn't like to think about that. But I couldn't get a sound out. I stood there watching Monk get ready with the barrel of that .45, and there wasn't a thing I could do.

JUST THEN the door opened. And we had more company.

I'd never seen her before. I had got the idea that the only women in Lenardo were saloon girls. But not this one. Her eyes didn't have that wise look, and she wasn't painted up like an Apache on a scalping party, so that ruled her out as a saloon

girl. But she was a cool one. She stood there in the doorway, looking at us with no special kind of expression. But that wasn't important. The little Colt's .32 in her right hand gave us the idea that she meant business.

Monk and the bartender were as surprised as I was. Monk looked as if he wanted to whirl and see if he could get his gun around before the girl could pull the trigger, but the bartender put a stop to that.

He said sharply, "Put it away, Monk." Reluctantly, Monk slid the .45 back into his holster and turned to face the girl. "Now, Miss Ronson," the bartender said softly, "you know you shouldn't be up here."

"Get out," the girl said. "Both of you."

"What are people going to think?" the bartender said. "A girl like you in a hotel like this. And at night."

"Get out," the girl said again, and this time she said it as if she meant it. She said it as if that little .32 might go off any minute if her suggestion wasn't taken seriously.

The bartender must have figured it the same way. Or maybe he had a superstition against fighting women. Anyway, he decided to let things stand as they were. He got hold of Monks arm and steered him toward the door. The girl stood back as they went out, keeping them covered all the time. The bartender paused for just a moment in the hallway and looked at me.

"Don't forget the talk we had, mister," he said. "It's still as important as it ever was. This don't change a thing."

They went down the stairs. I heard Monk cursing and the bartender trying to soothe him. The girl closed the door, holding the gun down at her side now.

She said, "Are you the lawyer hired to defend John Breckenridge?"

I went over to the wash stand and sloshed some water in my face and massaged my jaw until I got it to working. Nothing seemed to be broken. Monk would be sorry to hear that.

I turned and said, "The last time I answered that question this is what I got. I don't know how you managed it, but thanks for coming in when you did. It was beginning to look like a long night."

She didn't smile or do anything else. She just stood there. She had brown hair and a small face and large eyes. She wasn't particularly pretty, but there was something about her that made you think she was. Maybe it was her eyes.

"The Baker House doesn't go in much for furniture," I said. "But you can sit on the bed."

She shook her head. "Those men. . . they were trying to get you to leave Lenardo, weren't they?"

"They just about convinced me that it would be the smart thing to do."

"Don't!" she said urgent. "Don't go."

I didn't know what to make of it. A strange girl walking into my room, with a gun in her hand, and then forcing two hard-cases out before they beat out what I used for brains. But I was still too foggy to worry about the details. I sat on the bed, seeing that she wasn't going to.

"Maybe you'd better tell me about it," I said. "Why shouldn't I leave Lenardo? I've just heard a pretty good argument on why I should."

CHAPTER III

A Hunch to Play

YOU don't know anything about it, do you?" she asked.

"About what?"

"How John Breckenridge was hanged?"

"Well, I saw him dangling from a cottonwood limb. It looked like a pretty good job, if that's what you mean."

"It isn't," she said. "The hanging was all planned by his enemies—people he thought were his friends." She shook her head slightly, as if there were a lot of things that she wasn't very clear about. "Maybe he had it coming," she went on. "I don't know about that. He killed a man, but it could have been in self-defense.

Anyway, his enemies wanted him out of the way so they arranged the hanging before he could get a chance in court."

"Just a minute," I cut in. "The bartender called you Miss Ronson. Are you the one that wrote the letter to our law offices in Motelargo?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm the one."

"Then the hundred dollar retainer was your money?"

She nodded again. "I didn't tell John that I sent for you until you were already on your way to Lenardo. He wouldn't have anything to do with lawyers. He couldn't believe that his friends were really trying to get him out of the way."

"Well, Miss Ronson, it looks like you've got some change coming. I can't do much for Breckenridge now."

Something happened to those large eyes of hers. A sharp bitterness came up from behind them and looked out at me. "I don't want the money," she said, "I want the men who were responsible for the hanging. I want them brought to court and tried for murder."

"Wouldn't that be the sheriff's job?" I asked.

She made a short, unladylike sound. "The sheriff's in it with the others."

I thought about that for a while. It all made sense, in a crazy sort of way. Big John had been a big man in this country. A little rustling. Robbing the Mexican smuggling trains. He had been the ruler of Waycross County, putting his own men up for county offices and getting them elected with his .45's. I wondered how this Ronson girl ever got mixed up with him.

But I still wasn't anxious to have any more discussions like the one I'd just had with Monk and the bartender. It wasn't my business to avenge an outlaw that I didn't even know. I should have put those thoughts into words, but instead I said:

"Miss Ronson, would you mind telling me why you're so anxious to see Big John's killers brought to justice?"

"John and I were—friends," she said faintly.

"You were in love with him. Is that what you mean?"

The question surprised me more than it did her. What did I care if she was in love with an outlaw, and a dead one at that? She seemed to think it over carefully, as though she wanted to give an honest answer.

AT LAST she said, "I don't know. I thought I was—I suppose I still think so—but I'm not very sure about anything now. Does that make sense?"

It didn't, but I didn't say so. I was afraid to look at her now. I was afraid that if I saw those eyes of hers I would hear myself agreeing to throw in with this crazy plan of hers. She was a girl that grew on you.

She said, "There's a little more to it, but not much. I'd like to tell you about it before you decide to go back to Montelargo."

And I said, "All right. . . I'll listen."

So she told me the rest of it. There wasn't much more. Somebody had got ambitious to take over Big John's position as boss of Waycross County. What I hadn't known was that the government marshals had been on his tail at the time of the hanging—so the outlaw hadn't lost much after all. What difference did it make whether he was hanged on a cottonwood tree, or on a gallows in a federal courtyard? One thing was sure. When the United States sent special marshals out to get a man, he could begin to count his days.

I also learned that the girl's name was Nora Ronson, but I didn't find out just how she got mixed up with Big John. She was by herself here in Yenardo. Her family had died a few years back and she had gone into the dressmaking business, which was mostly furnishing the saloon girls with their fancy frills that they liked to wear. I wondered how many stitches she had taken to get that hundred dollars that she had sent to Montelargo.

After she had finished I didn't know what to say. Big John was dead and everybody was probably glad, except her. She didn't ask me again to help her. I guess she could see that it wasn't any use.

I got up and got my .45 out of my travel-

ing case, checked it and shoved it into my waistband. "I'll see you home," I said. "In case our friends might be waiting downstairs."

She lived just across the street in a little wooden building with a plate glass window in front. There was a sign on the window that said, *Miss. Ronson's Fashion Shoppe*, and the window was full of hats or different shapes and sizes, and a wooden dummy dressed to kill. She had her living quarters in the back of the store.

She gave me a key and I snapped the padlock on the door. "I wish there was something I could do," I said, "but—"

"Never mind," she said wearily. "I don't suppose it would change anything now. Good night, Mr. Sowerby."

She left me standing there. I stood on the plankwalk and watched her go to the back, and saw a lamp flare up. Well, that was that. I'd had enough for one night.

I didn't see any sign of Monk or the bartender. The three saloons in the town were all going strong, but I didn't look into any of them. I had some thinking to do. And if I looked into a saloon and saw the little gunman and his pal and I was afraid I wouldn't be very reasonable about things.

I didn't sleep very well that night. My head hurt, my jaw ached, and my mouth tasted like a sweaty saddle blanket. And Nora Ronson, I couldn't get her out of my mind. What had she seen in a man like John Breckenridge? Why didn't she pack up and leave Lenardo, and put him out of her mind? Well, that's women for you. For that matter, why didn't I put Nora Ronson out of my own mind? I guess that's men for you.

I wondered about my friends Monk and the bartender. I didn't think they had come up here just for the exercise. Somebody must be paying them for their labor, but I didn't know who. Or why. Unless maybe somebody was afraid that a lawyer's curious mind would start poking around and find out something that he wasn't supposed to know. After all, Big John Breckenridge had been a prospective client of mine. But who? I didn't have any answer to that one.

LATE the next morning I woke up. My head didn't feel so bad, and the throbbing in my jaw had settled down to a steady ache that would be with me for some time to come. I got up and washed my face and had a look in the mirror. My face didn't look too bad, but I still wasn't going to win any prizes with it. Then I heard the clatter and rattle of the east-bound stage coach pulling up to the office next door.

I went to the window and looked out. It was my stage all right, bound for Montelargo where they had nice law offices with leather chairs. Where hired gunmen hardly ever tried to beat your brains out. It was my stage and I intended to get on it.

Across the street I saw my friend the bartender. He was leaning against the hitching rail, whittling on it with a big broad-bladed bowie knife. Monk was beside him, doing nothing. Then the door of Nora Ronson's dress shop opened and she came out on the plankwalk. It looked like the send-off committee was out in strength.

Maybe that was the reason I didn't do anything—those two gunmen across the street so damned smug and sure that I'd be climbing on that stage and hightailing it out of Lenardo like a whipped dog with turpentine under its tail. Or maybe Nora had something to do with it. I wasn't sure then. I just stood there in the window and let the stage pull out without me. And I watched the bartender's mouth drop open in surprise and that made me feel better. After last night, he hadn't expected a lawyer to stick around, asking for another dose of the same medicine. I could almost hear him cursing from where I was.

I couldn't tell what was on Nora's face. She turned and went back into the dress shop.

I took my time about leaving the Baker House. The room seemed like a nice safe place to be, despite what had happened

last night, and I wasn't in any hurry to leave it. But I did finally. I went down to the street without getting shot at, then walked over to the livery stable and rented a hack for the morning.

Nora was standing behind her plate glass window when I drove up in front of her place and stopped. She opened the door and came outside, looking at me curiously.

"I thought you were going to Montelargo this morning."

"I changed my mind," I said. "How would you like to take a ride? It's not much of a hack, but it will get us as far as I want to go. Out to the cottonwood north of town."

She looked at me as if I was crazy. And maybe I was. But an idea had started working in the back of my mind, and it wouldn't let me alone until I did something about it.

She said faintly, "I couldn't . . . I couldn't possibly go to that place."

"Not even if it helped clear up the hanging?"

"How could that possibly help? My going out there and looking at the—"

She couldn't say "body," and I couldn't blame her. It wasn't going to be easy for her, but still I had a hunch and I wanted to see it through. For more than one reason.

At last she saw that I was serious. She still didn't understand how it would help if she saw the mutilated body. But she knew that I must have a reason, or I would have been on that east-bound stage right now instead of sticking my neck out for hired gunmen to take a whack at.

"Just a moment," she said. She went back into the shop and came out in a few minutes wearing a cape and a hat. We rode silently through Lenardo's main street. A few curious eyes watched us, but I couldn't tell what was behind them.

Only after we had left the town behind did she speak. "Why did you do it?" she asked. "Decide to stay here in Lenardo, I mean."

I felt my face warm, but I didn't think she noticed. "Call it a hunch," I said.

But it was more than that. I knew it when I saw her that morning—when she came outside her shop expecting to see me get on the stage. I knew it then, but I was just now getting around to admitting it to myself. Girls like Norma Ronson had no business getting mixed up with men like Big John Breckenridge. Maybe the outlaw had been handsome and hell on the women, and that was why she had fallen for him. Whatever the reason, I knew that I had to prove to her that he was no good. I had to prove to her that the outlaw wasn't worth loving or grieving over, and the best way to prove it was to show her. If my hunch was right.

CHAPTER IV

Boothill Masquerade

BUT, the way it turned out, my hunch didn't mean a thing. The body was gone when we got there. I didn't waste time trying to figure out what had happened to it. I thought I could guess.

Nora sat there, staring at the tree, and probably seeing Big John in her mind, swinging from that big outstretched limb. She said softly, "Could we—go back to town?"

I pulled the team around and headed back toward Lenardo.

"I'm sorry," I said as I let Nora out at the dress shop.

She said, "It doesn't make any difference now. I shouldn't have asked you to stay here in Lenardo, because nothing we can do will bring him back. I was bitter and hurt at first, but everything is all over now. You had better go back to Montelargo."

Even she was doing it. And maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all, but there was still one more little thing that I wanted to look into. So I left Nora there at her dress shop and drove on toward the end of the street. I turned left at the end of the block and headed toward a slope

that was dotted with white board crosses and a few headstones—Lenardo's cemetery.

But I was too late again. A couple of workers were patting the last shovel full of dirt on Big John's grave without much ceremony. They were the only ones there. There hadn't even been a funeral. I pulled the hack up beside the grave and the two workers sat down on the fresh mound and looked at me curiously. One of them took out a plug of tobacco, gnawed off a bite and chewed thoughtfully.

"Is that John Breckenridge you just buried?" I asked.

The tobacco chewer nodded. "I reckon so. That's what they tell us, anyway."

"Did you see the body?"

The man spat. "What was left of it."

"Who gave you orders to have it buried?"

The grave digger shifted sides with his cud and studied it over. "It seems like you ask a hell of a lot of questions," he said finally. "We don't never leave a body hangin' more'n a day or so. We're civilized. But it was the sheriff that gave the order, if that's what you're gettin' at."

That was what I was getting at. I said thanks and pulled the hack around. I looked back once and the two workers were sitting on their new grave, studying me thoughtfully, but I didn't think they would do anything. That hunch started nudging me again. It looked like the sheriff had decided pretty suddenly that Big John ought to be cut down and buried. He must have done it last night. Or maybe this morning, directly after seeing that I didn't get on the Montelargo stage. I wondered why the sheriff had suddenly taken such an interest in seeing that Big John's body was taken care of in a proper manner.

One way I might find out was to ask him. That was what I decided to do. I went back to the livery stable and traded the hack in for a saddle horse, and then rode down to the other end of the street where Sheriff Hally had his place of business.

He wasn't asleep this time, but he looked as if he might drop off any minute. He roused himself enough to look angry when I came in.

"What the hell do you want?" he said.

"A little favor," I said. "A couple of your citizens tried to persuade me last night that I ought to catch the next stage out of Lenardo. I'll take the hint and get out on the next coach, if you'll do this little favor for me."

HE STARTED to tell me to go to hell, but after thinking it over he changed his mind. With an effort he got his boots off the desk and forced a grin. "Why sure, mister," he said heartily. "Always glad to oblige a stranger. Now just what is this little—er, favor that you want?"

"I want you to open Big John's grave for an inspection of the body."

He looked as if I had just sunk a sharp toe in that big stomach of his. He said tightly, "Mister, get the hell out of here!" But when I turned he had changed his mind again. "Wait a minute," he said. "Why would you want me to do a thing like that?"

"For an inspection of the body, like I said."

Those eyes of his got to be careful eyes, and a careful little brain went to work behind them. "And just what good would an inspection do?" he asked.

"Sheriff, haven't you got an idea what we might find if that grave was opened?"

It was just a shot in the dark, but I could tell by his face that I had hit something. The anger was going out of those eyes now, and fear was coming in. Sheriff Hally was beginning to be a scared man.

He said, "You'd better take that hint, mister, and get out of Lenardo. The next time the hint may be stronger—and from the look of your face you couldn't stand that kind of persuasion." He stopped suddenly as a horse wheeled up at the hitching rack outside and a small man swung down from the saddle.

It was Monk, the little two-gun killer that had had such a big time last night beating my face in. He seemed to be in a

hurry. Quickly, he looped his reins over the hitching rail and came into the sheriff's office in a hurried trot. He didn't see me at first. He started talking as soon as he hit the doorway.

"The boss up in Lost Canyon says—" he started.

I could see the sheriff's neck swell and his face turn a dangerous red. He lurched up from his chair and shouted, "Get out of here, you fool!"

Then the little gunman saw me for the first time. He made a quick, automatic move for his guns, but I was ahead of him this time. I already had my .45 out of my waistband, the muzzle not more than a few feet from his belt buckle. He changed his mind and let his hands hang.

"Go on," I said. "What were you going to say?"

"Get out of here!" the sheriff shouted again.

Reluctantly, the little gunman turned. They had me, and there was nothing I could do about it. The sheriff saw it and allowed himself a small smile. "Go on, Monk," he said. "Mister, if you stop him you'll have to shoot him in the back. We call that murder in Waycross County."

I had to stand there and watch the gunman walk out on me—but it really didn't make much difference now. He had told me what I wanted to know.

"Lost Canyon," I said. "Is that where my client is hiding out?"

The sheriff just looked at me.

"Big John Breckenridge," I said. "He's no more dead than I am. He's hiding out in a place called Lost Canyon. You let his men break in and take him out of jail, and then they hanged some man about Big John's size to make it look like my client was dead."

"You're crazy," the sheriff said.

"Do you want to open the grave and prove it?"

He didn't say anything.

"I'm just guessing," I said, "but I must be hitting pretty close. I almost got my brains beat out because you were afraid I'd figure it this way if you didn't get me out of Lenardo in a hurry."

FOR a moment the sheriff looked at me coldly, shrewdly. "Why would Big John do a thing like that?" he asked tightly.

"Because United States Marshals were on his tail. He wasn't afraid of being convicted here in Lenardo, because he owned the sheriff and everybody else in public office. The United States Marshals were something else. Death is the only way you can beat them. So Big John made it look like a mob had taken him out of jail and lynched him, to get the marshals off his back. And now he's hiding out in Lost Canyon, doing business as usual, still the boss of Waycross County. Isn't that about right, Sheriff?"

The sheriff looked sick. "What—do you aim to do?"

"I'll ride to Benson and send a telegram to the Marshal's office. I'll lose a client that way, but I won't mind much."

I think it was the shotgun that got me. The way they had used a double load of buckshot in the hanged man's face, so that the casual observer would never be able to identify him. That was the reason I had wanted Nora to see the body. If anybody could tell me if the body had been Big John's double, it was Nora. But the sheriff and the burying detail had beaten me.

The sheriff said, "You'll never get away with it, mister. Big John's boys will get you before you can ride out of town."

Maybe. But that was a chance I was willing to take now. Big John had probably hurt a lot of people in his time. But he had no right to hurt a girl like Nora Ronson. And keep on hurting her.

I pushed the muzzle of my .45 in the sheriff's stomach and backed him into one of his own cells. I thought of that body dangling in the cottonwood, and what I had to do next was a pleasure. I laid the barrel of my gun across the sheriff's ear and he went down without making a sound.

The sheriff had been right about one thing. I would never make it to Benson—not while Monk was waiting outside for me. Well, I would have to trust to a little luck.

I backed meekly out of the office. "All right, Sheriff," I said loudly. "I know when I'm beat. I'll catch the next stage out, like you say."

Monk was there, on the plankwalk beside the office, as I had expected. He was grinning. I guess he figured from that speech that I had finally taken the hint to get out of Lenardo, so he didn't try to stop me when I unhitched my horse and climbed up to the saddle. I rode quietly to the end of the street. Then I sunk the iron to my livery stable mount and we left Lenardo behind.

I looked back briefly and saw that nobody was following us yet. But it wouldn't take long. Wait until Monk stepped into the office and saw the sheriff stretched out there on the jail floor.

CHAPTER V

The Long Ride

SO I HEADED toward Benson until I came to a shallow wash about three miles out from Lenardo. The livery stable horse was already beginning to blow and I knew he wouldn't hold up much longer. There wasn't time to cover tracks, because I figured the posse would already be on my tail by now. I cut the horse into the wash and we followed the stream until it started to curve back toward Lenardo. Finally we reached some high ground and I was able to look down and see how the chase was coming.

They were after me all right, about six of them barreling across the flatlands toward Benson. That was all right. They would ride for maybe ten more minutes before they discovered that I had cut back on them. It wasn't much time though, and I had a lot of things to do.

First, I had to find out where Lost Canyon was. The situation had come to a head the minute I flattened the sheriff on his jail floor. It was either me or Big John Breckenridge now, and the law of averages seemed to be pointing in Big John's favor. Anyway, I pulled my horse around. Nora Ronson was the only one I could think of to ask about the canyon, so that was the direction I was headed.

I circled Lenardo this time and came in from the rear. A small crowd was congregated down by the sheriff's office, but I managed to get around to Nora's dress shop without anybody seeing me.

She was looking out the window as I stepped inside. Her eyes were puzzled, so I figured she hadn't found out what had happened.

I said, "I'd like to have a little information. There's a man I want to see in Lost Canyon, but I don't know where the place is."

She looked at me curiously. "I know where it is," she said, "but it would be impossible to find unless you know the country."

"Try to tell me anyway," I said. "It's important."

There must have been something in my voice. She didn't try to argue with me and I was glad of that. She said, "If it's important, I could show you where the canyon is. You would never find it by yourself."

I didn't like it much, but I couldn't think of anything any better. In the back of my mind I had an idea that she could lead me into the general vicinity of the canyon, and then I could send her back to town.

Anyway, I nodded.

I don't know what she thought. Maybe she thought I had killed somebody and was looking for a place to hide out—or maybe she figured Monk and the bartender were after me again. Anyway, she kept her head and didn't waste time asking questions. It didn't occur to me that there was anything strange about it—a girl like her helping a man get away, and not even knowing what he had done.

But that's the way it was. I rode out of town again, taking the back way. I guess nobody was expecting to see me around Lenardo so soon. Anyway, the crowd by the sheriff's office didn't spot me, and pret-

ty soon I made it to some hills to the north of town, and there I waited.

PERHAPS fifteen minutes went by before Nora came up, riding the usual sidesaddle way on a hired horse. "Did anybody see you come up here?" I asked.

"I don't think so. I told the liveryman I had to ride out to the Langston ranch to deliver some dresses."

It sounded all right. And there wasn't any sign of the posse. I said, "Fine. I guess we'd better be riding."

Lost Canyon was about six miles from Lenardo, and Nora had been right—I never would have found it by myself. It was rough, broken land up there, with a wide arroyo slashing a tortuous path between the hills. Here and there were several feeder-washes, or small arroyos, that spread out from the big arroyo in all directions, like broken legs on a centipede. And one of those small gulches turned out to be Lost Canyon.

The mouth of the wash was small and grown up in weeds and vines. But once we forced our way through the mouth it turned out to be a respectable-sized canyon. It had a nice place to hide out, all right. The right man with a good rifle could hole up on one of those sheer walls and hold off a troop of cavalry—if they ever found him in the first place.

We must have surprised him as we came through the mouth of the wash. He jerked the first shot off—the shot that should have ended me—and the bullet ripped through the brush over my head. I couldn't tell where it came from, and I didn't try to find out until I had dropped from the saddle and pulled Nora down beside me. It was too late now to send her back to town. It looked like it was too late for anything.

But we spotted a rock and got behind it just as the rifle began to peck away at us. Nora's eyes were wide, not with fear so much as with shock and surprise. She wanted to ask me what I had led her into—who it was up there shooting at us. Her mouth worked but no sound came out.

I said, "If I told you I don't think you would believe me. But maybe there's a way of showing you." Then the rifle blasted away again and I thought I saw a little whisper of smoke drift up from behind a boulder. I shouted in that direction.

"Big John, you might as well come out. If you give up now you'll get a fair trial. If you don't, there'll be government marshals on you by sundown."

Deep, big-chested laughter came down from the boulder. "Go to hell, lawyer! You won't live long enough to tell the government anything!"

"All right," I shouted back, "if that's the way you want it. But Nora's down here with me. Let her get out of the canyon before the shooting starts again."

The laughter came down again, but this time it was edged with bitterness. "I don't reckon it's my job to look out for her, lawyer. It looks like she's taken up with new company. Protect her, lawyer, if you think you can."

For a long moment I didn't look at Nora. I got out my .45 and checked the loading, wondering if a short gun could do me any good in a fix like this. When I finally did look at her, her face was pale, as if she had just seen a ghost. And I guess she had—or she had heard one, anyway. All this time she had thought that body hanging from the cottonwood had been Big John, and it took some time for her to realize that the outlaw wasn't dead.

BUT finally she got it. I could almost see her piecing it together, a little at a time. Big John wasn't dead, and he must have planned the whole thing. The mob, the jail break, the hanging. All of it. And when she finally got it figured out she leaned weakly against the rock and pressed her face against her arms.

"Why . . . ?" Her voice was little more than a whisper. "Why did he do it?"

"The United States Marshals were after him," I said. "They're worse than Rangers when it comes to tracking men down. The only way they'll stop looking is to know

their man is good and dead."

"Then the body in the cottonwood. . . ."

"He was probably just a drifter," I said. "He had the hard luck to be a big man. As big as Big John. Wearing Big John's clothes and taking a load of buckshot in the face, nobody could tell the difference."

I wanted to break it to her gently, but there's no way of being gentle about murder. There was a sharp little sound, an intake of breath, but that was all. I couldn't see her face. I couldn't tell if she was bitter, or crying, or angry. I couldn't even be sure now if she was surprised. Maybe she had been afraid that it would end like this some day . . . maybe.

I didn't have long to worry about it. Big John started blasting with that rifle again. He had shifted positions and was getting closer. Too close for comfort. I said, "You stay here, Nora. I'm going to move on up the slope."

Anyway, I figured I would draw the fire away from the rock. But Nora didn't say anything. I made a run for another boulder, hitting the ground on my belly as one of Big John's slugs kicked up dust at my feet. I let go once with my .45 to let him know that I was still all right.

And maybe that's the way it would have ended, if something else hadn't happened —with me dodging from one rock to another until finally I exposed myself long enough for Big John to get a bullet into me. But then there was a sound of hoofbeats down in the arroyo, and I knew that Monk and the rest of Big John's men had heard the shooting and had figured out what was happening.

Up on the slope I could almost see Big John grinning, and waiting. It was just a matter of time now, and he didn't have to take any chances himself. That was what he hired his gunmen for.

Monk was the first one to break into the mouth of the canyon, and Big John up on the slope bellowed something—a warning about me, I suppose. But Monk didn't hear it in time, or surprise caused him to lose control of his horse. Anyway, the animal reared just as the little gunman was bringing his pistol around in my direction, and I got off the first shot.

Monk jumped out of the saddle as if he had been jerked down with a lariat around his neck. He hit the ground solidly and didn't move.

But I didn't have time to congratulate myself on the good shooting. Monk's bartender pal broke through the opening right after the little gunman. But the bartender wasn't much with a pistol. While he was taking two wild shots I had all the time in the world to aim. He had a lot of guts, but not many brains. He should have dropped from the saddle and found himself a rock to get behind, and then he and Big John would have had me boxed in. But instead he tried to shoot it out from where he was.

One of my bullets got him about three buttons up from his belt buckle, and he sat there for an instant with surprise spreading over his big face—and then pain —and then nothing. His face turned blank and he rolled gracefully off the saddle, with an ease of movement that he had never known in life, and seemed to pour to the ground beside his pal.

IT ALL happened fast, and I emptied my gun into the opening, hoping that would give the rest of the boys something to think about while I loaded again. And I guess it did. I heard the horses scampering around in the arroyo, but nobody else ventured in. It must have looked like a pretty unhealthy place after seeing Monk and the bartender go down the way they had.

I decided to make the most of it. I punched the empties out and reloaded and blasted as fast as I could aim and pull the trigger, first in Big John's direction and then at the canyon opening. When I ran out of bullets I reloaded and did the thing all over again. It must have sounded like we had a whole regiment of United States Marshals wedged in between those canyon walls—anyway, that was what the rest of the posse must have thought. The horses scampered around some more, and I heard the sheriff's voice, high and ner-

vous. He didn't sound like a man ready to do battle.

Sure enough, before long the horses moved out into the arroyo. I could hear the sheriff's posse hightailing it back for Lenardo, and I wondered if Big John was still grinning. I had two more cartridges left in my gun. I used them on Big John's fortress just to see how he was taking it.

Not very well, it turned out. As I was reloading he shouted down to me.

"I'm hit, Sowerby! I want to come in!"

I wondered if I had nicked him with one of those wild shots of mine. It didn't seem likely, but I called back, "All right, stand up where I can see you and throw your gun down."

Slowly, he rose from behind the boulder, leaning to the left and holding his hand to his side. Maybe I had hit him, after all. His rifle clattered as he threw it down. "All right, lawyer," he said weakly, "I know when I'm beat. I'm coming in."

And he started limping down the slope, holding his side with both hands now. He was a fine figure of a man—tall and dark, in tailored broadcloth and a flat-crowned hat. Big John was a handsome man and I could see how a girl could be fooled by him. Even a girl like Nora Ronson.

I saw that he wasn't wearing any side guns, so I let my own .45 hang by my side as he staggered down the slope. "I'm all in," he moaned weakly. "You've got to get me to a doctor, Sowerby."

And he did look all in. His face was twisted, as if he were gritting his teeth in pain, and he kept clutching his side. For a moment I almost felt sorry for him. But only for a moment. I stepped out from behind the rock, waiting for him. Then, as he came close, the sickness went from his face. I thought I saw a quick grin flash in his eyes, and when his right hand jerked away from his side it was holding a murderous little twin-barreled derringer.

I fell and hit the ground with my face, but I started falling even before I saw that flash of a grin, or the glint of that little gun. From behind me Nora's voice cut like a knife through the stillness. I didn't understand what she was screaming about. Maybe there weren't any words. Just her voice. But there was an urgent desperateness about it. I hit the ground as Big John's little weapon seemed to explode in my face.

But it only seemed that way. The two bullets went ripping over my head, and when I flipped over, the muzzle of my .45 was looking at the outlaw's middle.

I don't know why I didn't shoot him while he was standing there helpless with his little derringer empty. Maybe that was what he wanted. Getting killed that way was better than going through a trial and waiting on the hangman. And Big John knew it was all over—without his guns—without his hired gunmen.

But I only said, "Nora, will you get the horses? I guess we'll be going back to Lenardo."

SO THAT'S what we did, with Big John riding the saddle in front of me, with his legs tied under the horse's belly. And when we got to Lenardo the sheriff was willing to listen to reason. He knew as well as anybody that the outlaw would never be boss of Waycross County again, now that it was known that he was still alive.

I made the ride to Benson myself and sent the telegram to the Marshal's office. Then I sent a wire to the law offices in Montelargo telling Davis, Davis and Davis that it looked like we had lost a client. Big John was still alive, and he needed a lawyer as bad as anybody I ever saw, but I didn't think he would want me. After all that was over I told myself that I was going to start back for Montelargo. But the next day I found myself back on the road to Lenardo.

Men from the Marshal's office were already in town when I got there, and from the looks of things they had it under control. I didn't bother to stop at the sheriff's office. I went on down the street to where Nora had her dress shop, but when I reached it the shop wasn't there any more.

The building was still there, but it was empty and lonesome looking, and dust

was already beginning to settle on the empty shelves inside. It looked like I had made that extra trip to Lenardo for nothing. There was nothing in the town for me if Nora wasn't there—and it was clear enough that she had already left. Probably she had gone to some place where she could forget Big John, and the man who had brought about his end.

I tried to tell myself that it didn't matter. But I wasn't in the mood for kidding. I turned the horse into the livery corral and walked heavily down to the stage office.

I knew that the time to start forgetting Nora Ronson was right now—but I couldn't help asking the sour-faced stage agent if she had taken a stage out of Lenardo, and if he knew where she was going.

He nodded sourly to both questions. She had taken a stage two days ago. She was going to Montelargo.

For a minute I didn't believe it. Montelargo was as good a town as any, but why would she pick it?

The stage agent thought of something else as he was making out my ticket. "Your name Sowerby?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Miss Ronson said to tell you she would be in Montelargo. Openin' a dress shop there."

Suddenly I felt better. It was going to be a long wait, staying there in the Baker House until the next east-bound stage came in. But I figured it would be worth it. I had more than just an office and three law partners waiting for me now.

THE PASSING OF A HANDY BLIND

THE old time bronc buster, working out in the open range at the job of snapping out a bunch of wild ones and fitting them for work, had a set way of going about his job. Often he worked alone, and had to do the best he could with nothing to do it with.

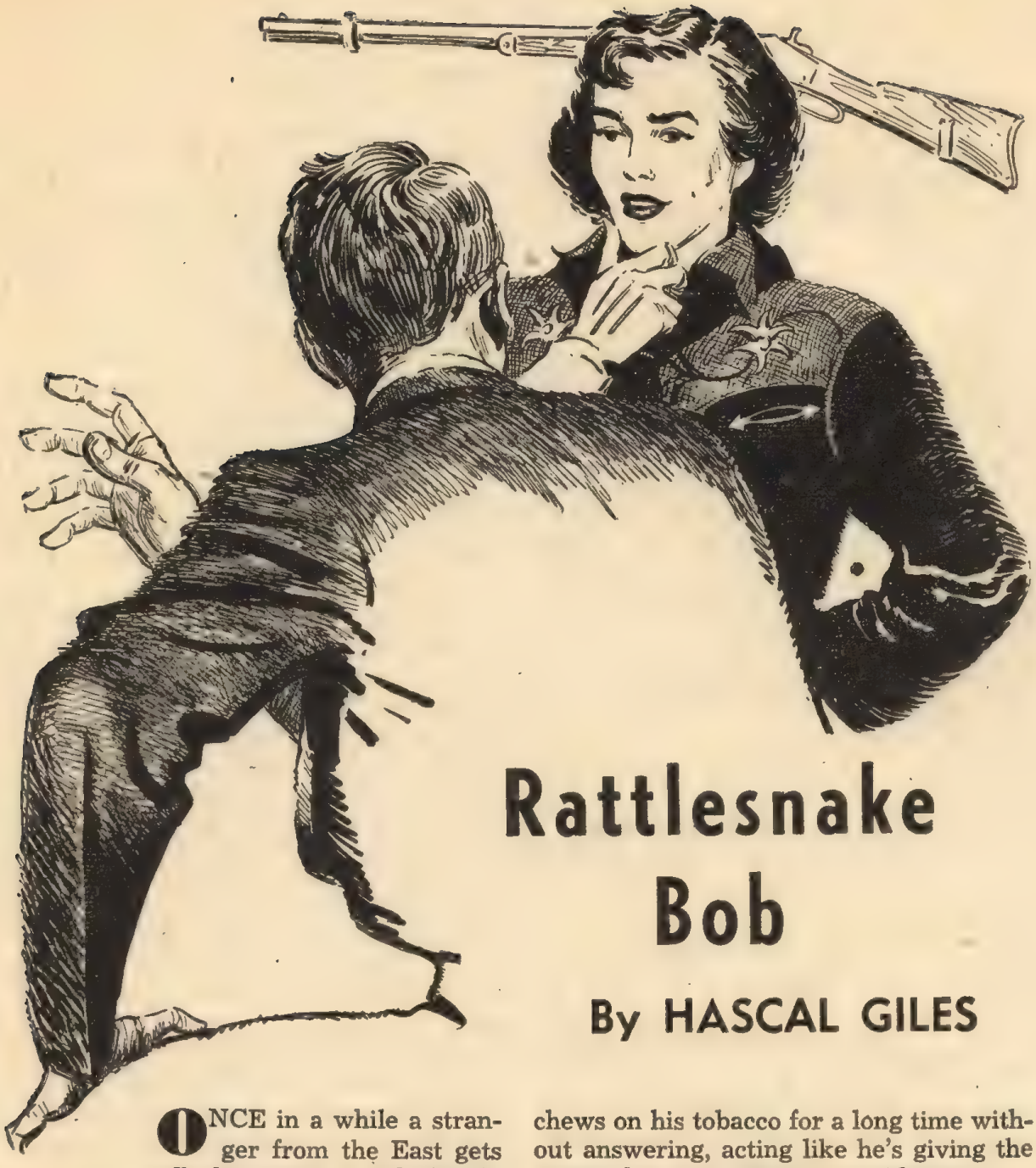
After catching a bronc, the first job was to get the saddle on him, and this itself was a big part of the task. The sight and feel of a kak almost invariably made a wild bronc very unhappy, and his objections to having it tried on for size were often strenuous.

Consequently the bronc had to be handicapped, and this was usually done with a blind. Anything would do for a blind, an old feed sack, a wide leather strap that could be buckled over the eyes and fastened to the cheek piece of the hackamore. Or, lacking anything else, the rider's vest made a fine blind.

The vest was used by slipping one armhole over one ear and the other over the other ear, having the solid back part of the vest covering the horse's face, and holding it in place by buttoning the top button of the vest under the bronc's throat.

But now the cowpoke is handicapped; he doesn't wear that old cowboy standby any more. He usually wears a denim jumper with sleeves and a zipper in it. Thus, fashion has robbed him of an item that was handy for more than just carrying a sack of Bull Durham and a pocketful of matches.

—Al Echols



Rattlesnake Bob

By HASCAL GILES

ONCE in a while a stranger from the East gets off the stage in Blackjack, and, if he's looking for information, he usually makes his way to the adobe jail and inquires of Sheriff Nate Gibson. Sometimes they ask for Robert Hardy Stitt, and it's then that Nate gets a puzzled look on his leather-brown face and chews on his tobacco for a long time without answering, acting like he's giving the matter his most serious consideration.

Finally, he puckers his lips, aims at the cuspidor across the corner of his cluttered desk and, after everyone has scurried to safety, Nate says: "I reckon you must mean Rattlesnake Bob Stitt, pilgrim. Know 'im well. Matter of fact, I reckon I

Robert Hardy Stitt couldn't see why a man should be known by any other name in Blackjack, Texas. He had to find out the hard way

was the first person to lay eyes on 'im when he come here to take over the Triangle Ranch."

And then, just to let the stranger know he's in Texas, Nate tells how it was that Robert Hardy Stitt almost got chased out of Blackjack before he learned the cow country was full of titled lords.

* * *

Everyone in Blackjack knew the Triangle Ranch belonged to a rich old Englishman back east by the name of Sir John Cokesbury, but they didn't mind this much because they didn't have to be bothered with him. Ace Spates, the Triangle ramrod, ran the place and Sir John divided his time between a sugar maple tract in Vermont and a cotton plantation in South Carolina. The only contact he had with the Triangle after he came to Blackjack and bought it up for back taxes was a yearly report mailed by Ace Spates along with a draft on the Blackjack bank for any profits that the spread might show.

The first anybody knew of any change in this arrangement was when Ace Spates received a letter saying Sir John had cashed in his chips. There was a copy of his will enclosed, and from this Ace learned how Sir John had disposed of his holdings in the States. He had left the South Carolina property to his manager there, the sugar plantation went to a cousin in England, and the Triangle to Robert Hardy Stitt, "who has been overseer of my Vermont holdings for the past six years and the only man among my associates who has the good business sense and intestinal fortitude to make a success of an undertaking in such a God-forsaken place as Blackjack, Texas."

After he got off the stage in Blackjack one day a month later and explained to the sheriff he was the new owner of the Triangle, and not a medicine show barker, Robert Hardy Stitt rented a carriage and drove out to the ranch with as much confidence as if he had been born in Texas.

IT WAS true that Nate Gibson's reaction to his arrival was somewhat disturbing, but Stitt charged that off to plain native jealousy. Nate looked him over from the toes of his gleaming black dragoon boots to the top of his duster-covered plaid cap, and said: "I hear tell Sidney Dalton tried to buy Triangle off Sir John before he passed on, and I allow the offer still stands. Was I you, pard, I'd sell. Any Texas bull with half sense eats Englishmen alive. You don't know a cow from the east end of a barn, and you won't have a crew by sun-up. Now the best way to get to Sidney's Bar D is to go right past Triangle and keep to your—"

"Really, old chap, the Triangle is not for sale," Stitt told him, and went on to the livery stable to rent the rig.

The first person he saw when he came into the Triangle ranch yard was a big raw-boned man with steel gray hair and a broad, sun-lined face. The man was standing in front of a long clapboarded structure that Stitt judged to be the employes' quarters, and he was bent over a basin of water, scrubbing his face with his hands. At the sound of the rig stopping, the man sleeved the water off on his faded blue flannel shirt and looked around.

His eyes opened wide when he saw Robert Hardy Stitt sitting there in his fawn-colored riding breeches and short-tailed green jacket. "I reckon you've done lost your way, pilgrim. The road to town is back there a-ways."

"I'm looking for a Mr. Spates," Stitt said. "He's the overseer here, I believe."

The way the newcomer dumped his words out in a hurry and then bit them off at the end brought a pained look to the rawboned man's face. "I'm the ramrod here, I reckon. We ain't got no overseer. I'm Ace Spates."

"Then you must've received my wire, old fellow. I'm Stitt."

"Howdy," Ace Spates said. They shook hands briefly as Stitt stepped down into the yard, and then Ace Spates said, "I was shore sorry to hear of John Cokes-

bury cashin' his chips in."

"It was *Sir* John, y'know," Stitt corrected. "He was titled by the queen for doing a bully job of providing supplies for the—"

Ace Spates shrugged and cut him off short. "Never liked to hang too much of a handle on a man. I always called him plain John."

Robert Stitt seemed to bristle like an offended porcupine. To Stitt's way of thinking, informality was the worst enemy of respect. But, for the moment, he let Ace Spates' explanation pass without comment, and they got busy getting his belongings unloaded from the carriage and into the big log house which sprawled behind a grove of post oaks east of the bunkhouse.

One of the first things Stitt wanted to do was to look over the records of the Triangle's past operation. When he failed to find anything helpful in the dusty roll-top desk in the musty-smelling parlor, he asked Ace Spates to tell him about it.

The foreman took a sweat-soiled tally book from his shirt pocket and handed it to Stitt. "It's all in here. What's owin' to the boys, what's been spent for supplies and what we got to work on."

A look inside the book only confused Robert Stitt, who had found the paper work on the sugar plantation one of the most exhaustive and exacting of tasks. The book contained a list of words that hardly sounded like names, and a bunch of scrawled figures that were mysteries to all but Ace Spates.

"A cowpoke don't draw no wages until he's ready to pull stakes for good," Spates explained. "They draw tobacco and whisky money, and the rest is left for a movin' stake."

It was a custom Robert Stitt could not approve from a business standpoint. "They will draw wages hereafter, Mr. Spates," he said. "They will be paid by check at the first of every month, and by *name*, Mr. Spates."

Ace Spates shrugged and looked sad. "I reckon you'll want to meet the rest of the crew today, 'cause there won't be time tomorrow. I'll bring 'em in."

Ace went outside rubbing his brow like his head was full of buzzing hornflies. He returned a few minutes later with the four other Triangle riders who came in trying to walk without rattling their spurs too loud. They held their hats in their hands, bunching themselves around the wall like a group of kids on the first day of school. They were surprised to find Robert Hardy Stitt was not a crochety old gentleman with chin whiskers. Instead, he was rather boyish looking with mild blue eyes and a mouth that looked like it could smile easily when it wanted to. The surprise in their faces was brief, however, and when it was gone there were mostly expressions of uncertainty.

ROBERT HARDY STITT looked up at them from a chair behind the roll-top desk. He had a sheet of paper spread out beside Ace Spates' tally book, and he started setting things in their proper order right away.

"It is my opinion," Sitt said, "that men can work together efficiently only when they respect each other and their employer. In my country a man's name is his pride, and I expect it to be so on Triangle Ranch. You chaps may call me Robert, if you wish, and I shall address you by your names. Now, let's get right down to business."

Stitt paused and glanced at Ace Spates' tally book. He wrote something on the blank sheet of paper, and asked: "Who's Cobbler Jones?"

A bald, round-faced little man with a flour-sack apron tied around his waist stepped forward and smiled toothlessly. "That's me."

Stitt's notations on the paper became clear then, and every man in the room began to shift uncomfortably. He asked Cobbler Jones his real name, and after a long pause, Cobbler said: "Earl." The room shook with laughter. Stitt gave them a silencing stare, and the guffawing stopped.

"Hereafter, my good man, you will be known as Earl Jones on the Triangle.

And now, Mr. Spates, what is your name?"

Ace Spates looked helplessly about him, and his face turned the color of dead cactus. "Blythe," he said. The man immediately behind him was seized by a fit of coughing, but there was no laughter. Robert Stitt went right on down the list, correcting One-Shot Adams to Harold Adams; Bucky Lane to Alfonso Lane, and Muleshoe Davis to Herman Davis. Afterward, he dismissed them all except the foreman.

Robert Stitt couldn't have picked a worse time to show up at the Triangle if he had ridden in on an epidemic of hoof and mouth disease. He learned from Spates that the Triangle crew had spent the day getting equipment in shape for spring roundup. The gather was to start in the morning. He asked about delaying the range work until he was better acquainted with the duties of the ranch, but Spates shook his head.

"Prices are ridin' the top," the foreman said, "and they're bound to fall. Besides, it's best we get out and slap our brand on the young stuff before any maverickin' gets started. There's a nest of squatters moved in up the valley, and they're just waitin' to start a herd with a runnin' iron and somebody's unbranded calves. But it's your spread, mister. If you say wait, we'll wait."

"Not at all, old chap," Stitt said. "This ranch is the only thing I've owned of my own, and I expect to prove myself worthy of Sir John's trust. We'll start in the morning, of course." Ace Spates started to move away, but Robert Stitt stood up and clapped a comradely hand on his shoulder. "I'll need all your help and trust here, Blythe. This means a great deal to me, y'know. I was a very poor lad until Sir John brought me over from London to give me the same chance he found in this country."

Ace Spates winced at the sound of his Christian name, and hurried toward the door with his lips a thin line. He stepped back inside a moment later, and Robert Stitt thought there was an eager expression in his eyes when he said, "Sid Dalton's out here. Wants to palaver with you a minute."

"Then show the visitor inside," Stitt said coolly. He sat down at the desk again and waited, working himself into his most aloof attitude. This would have to be settled quickly and finally, and Stitt was just in the mood to talk man to man.

A moment later Sidney Dalton stepped inside, and Robert Stitt got up from the chair much faster than he had sat down. "Why—why you're a young lady!"

SIDNEY DALTON shoved her dusty Stetson off her jet black hair, and let it dangle on the back of her red silk blouse by the chin strings. She slapped her deerskin riding gloves carelessly against the thigh of her tight-fitting levis and smiled.

"Well, I should hope so," she said. "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Stitt. Mother and I run the Bar D north of here, and we've been hoping to pick up a little extra graze for a long time. We're prepared to offer you—"

Robert Stitt could not be as haughty as he had hoped to be, for he was still a trifle stunned by the appearance of this sun-washed girl with the flashing gray eyes who had a figure like a picture on a calendar, but dressed and talked like a range hand. But he did manage a certain stiffness in his voice when he interrupted to tell her that he had heard she would make this offer, that he was very happy to meet her, but that the Triangle was not for sale—now or ever.

Sidney Dalton did not seem to be overly disappointed. She chuckled pleasantly and started toward the door. "It's a standing offer, Mr. Stitt, so don't forget us when you change your mind. By the way, what's wrong with Ace Spates? He acts like he's just been gored by a Brahma."

"Why I don't know," Stitt said. "Really, I don't. I hadn't noticed Blythe was suffering from anything."

"Did you say Blythe?" The girl's voice rose in genuine laughter now, and she looked at Robert Hardy Stitt like she felt

sorry for him. "Oh, he's suffering all right, Mr. Stitt."

Sidney Dalton went on outside, still laughing. Robert Stitt watched her ride away, a bewildered expression on his face. She was a very strange girl, indeed, and quite arrogant, too. She had not said *if* you change your mind; she had said *when*. Was that a threat?

The Triangle roundup got off on schedule, but Robert Stitt felt from the very start there was something wrong with it. There was an uncomfortable air about the little caravan that moved away from the ranch and headed out into the trackless grass and blazing sun. Stitt chose a seat in the chuck wagon with Cobbler Jones, wearing, at the cook's insistence a pair of the man's patched levis and a cast-off black hat which looked like it had been run over in a stampede.

"Ought to tie on a pair of chaps, too," Cobbler suggested. "We got rattlers out here in some of these canyons long as a fence rail, and that's one thing they can't strike through."

Feeling uncomfortable already, Stitt passed up this suggestion and by the time they reached the first bunch of cattle he couldn't remember another word of conversation having passed between the men.

ACTIVITY was stepped up after the branding fire was made, and riders began driving in half-wild cattle from the brush and draws; but the zestful cursing and good-natured bickering which Stitt had always associated with these devil-may-care men of the outdoors was absent. He was an interested spectator to the proceedings, standing at a safe distance and watching as One-Shot Adams and Mule-shoe Davis hazed the white-faced cattle in close to the fire. There Bucky Lane went to work with rope and pigging strings, rendering them helpless under Ace Spates' branding iron in a matter of seconds.

Later in the afternoon, Stitt began to go along with the riders on trips into the hideaways to herd the cattle into the open. True to his British breeding, he was as much at home on a horse as most of the men. But proof that he was not altogether a tenderfoot did nothing to relieve the tension dogging the roundup camp. The restraint held on like a danger signal, and it was not directed at him. The men seemed sullen and ill-at-ease among themselves.

The evening meal of jerky and beans was disposed of in the same silence as the work, and the men rolled up in their blankets and went to sleep without any lingering over cigarettes and horseplay at the campfire. Robert Stitt felt uneasy about the situation. He went to sleep with a foreboding that he would awake to some strange disaster.

But the work went on for the next three days much as it had at the beginning, and by nightfall of the fourth day the Triangle crew was camped at the foot of Eagle Canyon with three hundred head of prime cattle bunched between the sheer rock walls and ready to be herded to Blackjack's loading pens for shipment. They had worked around in a circle so that they were now less than three hours' ride from the home ranch, and Robert Stitt could hardly control his eagerness to be done with the work.

During the entire absence from the ranch he had heard no more than half a dozen scattered conversations among the men, and these were in gruff and cautious tones. There had not been so much as the calling of a name, for all conversations began with, "Hey, you there," or, "All right, hombre; lift a hand here."

Robert Stitt had held his curiosity and his disapproval in check as long as he could. With the roundup finished, it appeared to him that now was a time for relaxation and celebration. But the Triangle crew merely sprawled around the campfire that night, smoking wordlessly and staring morosely into the flames.

Stitt called Ace Spates aside and asked him what was wrong. Ace fixed him with a challenging stare. "Don't 'pear to be nothin' wrong, mister. We've made a good gather, and we've got less'n a day's drive to railhead." Ace glanced at the heavy

storm clouds scudding across the night sky and added: "With luck, that is."

Seeing that Spates would tell him nothing more, Stitt went back to the fire. The foreman got his bedroll from beneath the chuck wagon, tapped out the dead ashes from his pipe against the run-over heel of his boot, and went off into the darkness to find a place to spread his blankets. One-Shot Adams followed Spates, and Stitt knew he would be sitting there alone within a few minutes still not knowing what it was that threatened to tear apart his crew from the inside out.

BEFORE anyone else had a chance to turn in, the roar of Ace Spates' gruff voice from somewhere beyond the fire brought them all to their feet. The first thing they heard was a string of Ace's best-dressed swear words, and then a loud cackling laugh from gangling One-Shot Adams. But One-Shot's laugh seemed to peter out right when he was

enjoying it most, and the silence was followed by the unmistakable sound of two hard-muscled men swapping blows.

Even though he was the shortest man in the crowd by a foot, Bucky Lane cleared the campfire in a single leap and was gone. He took a short cut to the gnarled cedar where Ace Spates and One-Shot Adams had started to spread their bedrolls like two good partners.

Cobbler Jones' rheumatism had been bothering him from sleeping on the ground, and he was a little slow getting to his feet, but he didn't waste any time once he had his legs under him.

"Glory be!" Cobbler yelled. "It's a fight, by jingo!"

There actually wasn't much of a fight to it, Robert Stitt found when he came up behind Cobbler Jones a moment later, for there wasn't a man on the Blackjack range who was a match for Ace Spates in a free-for-all. Ace's nose was spurting blood, but One-Shot's single lucky blow didn't disturb him any more than a mosquito bite. Ace had One-Shot down on his back, and was sitting astride him, lifting the man's head up and down by the hair and thumping it against the ground.

At Robert Stitt's command, Cobbler Jones and Bucky Lane caught Ace by the arms and pulled him off of One-Shot Adams. Muleshoe Davis, almost as big and hulking as Ace, took up his stance between them, but Ace kept glaring at One-Shot like he might tackle him again any minute.

"Now see here, you chaps," Stitt said sternly. "This sort of thing cannot go on at the Triangle, y'know. It's not at all the intelligent way to settle disputes. Really, old fellow, I'm surprised at you," he said to Ace Spates. "Why are you attacking this man?"

Ace Spates spat disdainfully and pointed a shaking hand at One-Shot Adams. "He called me something. That's why. And if he ever does it again I'll break every bone in his head."

"Whatever did he call you?" Stitt asked.

Ace Spates seemed to simmer down a bit, and he dug his toe into the dirt and looked away. "It's a personal matter, Mr. Stitt."

ROBERT STITT turned on One-Shot Adams for an answer then, and found that One-Shot still considered the roughing-up worth the satisfaction he got from stirring Ace Spates into a frenzy.

One-Shot's face was as innocent as that of a new-born colt. "Why, I only done what you said, Mr. Stitt. I just said 'Now, won't it be nice, Blythe, to walk into the Blackjack bar after we get the cattle loaded and cash a big fat check made out to Blythe Spates?' Then he tore into me. I don't rightly know what set him off thataway."

Ace Spates growled like a mad grizzly and took a threatening step toward One-Shot Adams. "You know, One-Shot. You ever call me that again and I'll make you

look like a discarded chaw of tobacco."

Robert Stitt stepped between the two men now, and his own face showed signs of rising anger. Stitt made a decision then, one he considered ungrateful and unfortunate; but it was for the good of the service, so to speak.

"Mr. Adams was following an order, Mr. Spates. I'm afraid if you can't do the same, I shall have to dismiss you."

"Suits me fine," said Ace Spates. He gathered up his bedroll and started toward the hobbled horses to pick out his mount. Over his shoulder, he said: "Leave my pay at the Blackjack Bar. In cash. I'll pick it up there."

One-Shot Adams shuffled from one foot to the other a time or two, and reached for his own bedroll. He mumbled that he had been working for Ace a long time, and that if the Triangle was too good for Ace it was too good for him as well. He said to leave his wages at the Blackjack Bar.

Bucky Lane and Cobbler Jones held a whispered conference with Muleshoe Davis, and then the three of them rolled their blankets and caught their horses. Robert Stitt knew there wasn't anything he could do to change their minds so he stood by helplessly and watched them leave. Just before they went out of earshot, he heard the men talking and laughing among themselves, and this brought a bewildered expression to his face. Robert Stitt didn't have to be a top hand to know he had big trouble in his lap.

BY THE dawn the next day, the clouds which had brought a worried look to Ace Spates' craggy face had stopped galloping around the sky and had piled up ugly and threatening over Eagle Canyon. Along the murky horizon, fingers of lightning were darting up in eerie flashes, and the cattle were milling restlessly.

Stitt mounted the buckskin pony which had been left for him, and started riding an uneasy patrol along the makeshift pole fence which had been thrown up across the mouth of the canyon to keep the cattle penned. He could sense the nervousness of the herd, excited already because of the strange surroundings, and he recognized it as a danger signal. He had heard what could happen at a time like this. At a sudden clap of thunder the cattle could come crashing easily through the flimsy barricade and be scattered over endless miles of range again.

Stitt was trying to sing to the cattle, like he'd heard Ace Spates do on other uneasy nights, when Sidney Dalton came riding into the camp on a prancing pinto.

The girl pulled her horse to a standstill alongside the buckskin, smiling. "Good morning, Mr. Stitt. I was wondering if you would consider an offer for the Triangle today."

Robert Stitt's jaw squared and his mild blue eyes narrowed in sudden conviction. "Really, my good girl, I believe I've been quite the fool. But you won't get the Triangle so easily, y'know. I judged you were determined in this matter, but I doubted you would go so far as to shanghai my men away from me. It's not very sporting of you, y'know. Rather disgusting, I'd say!"

He bowed stiffly in the saddle, turning his horse back toward the bawling cattle. Sidney Dalton reined the pinto swiftly around, blocking his way. Her red lips were trembling with indignation, and her walnut brown eyes were full of angry sparks.

"Why, you thick-headed tenderfoot!" she said between clenched teeth. "Does all that polite palaver mean you're accusing me of crowding you into a tight spot so I can force you to sell out? You've got some things to learn, Mr. Stitt."

She lashed the pinto into action so abruptly that Stitt dodged instinctively, thinking she meant to run him down. But the girl headed the horse in the other direction, riding furiously toward the Bar D. Stitt had no regrets for what he had said, but rather a vain longing for what might have been possible under different circumstances. If Sidney Dalton had not been so intent on taking the Triangle from him in her own way, Stitt might have found the opportunity at some later date to point out an obvious solution to her am-

bition to own the largest ranch in the Blackjack country. The merger of two properties—when one was owned by a woman and the other by a man—could be quite a simple matter sometimes. This had been on Stitt's mind since their first meeting when he found he could not keep from thinking about her. But now she probably would never speak to him again.

SIDNEY DALTON had said Stitt needed to learn some things, and his lessons started about two hours later when the girl came riding back to his camp with the whole Bar D crew behind her. She stopped her men with a wave of her hand, and then rode up beside Robert Stitt where he was still patrolling the canyon barricade.

"Something you ought to know about Texas, Mr. Stitt," she said tartly, "is that we consider it neighborly to help a man when he's in trouble."

Before Robert Stitt could reply, Sidney Dalton had turned and was shouting orders to the Bar D crew. "Get them out of that box canyon, boys, and point their heads toward Blackjack. The critters act like they'll run if the storm breaks, and if they do we'll chase them right into the loading pens. Get them moving, Bluff! Cougar, you and Cyclone take the drag, and don't let them circle on you."

"I was quite right, Miss Dalton," Robert Stitt said then. "I've been the fool, by jove. A terrible fool. Please forgive me."

"Forget it," Sidney said, smiling at his humility. "Even if I had been trying to freeze you out, I saw this morning that it wouldn't have worked. That's why we're here, I guess. But just promise me one thing. Don't go trying to change Bluff Crabb's name to Clarence or something. Bluff earned that name fair and square. He's proud of it, and wants to keep it, and I want to keep my foreman."

Robert Stitt raised up in the stirrups, watching his cattle string out toward the railroad. He glanced at the sky, saw that it was clearing, and he smiled happily. "Of course not, Miss Dalton. These are your men, and I expect you to. . . Did you say he earned the name, Miss Dalton?"

The girl nodded. "One of the Curly Bill gang waylaid Bluff once when he was carrying the Bar D roundup cash back home. That was before my father died. Bluff sat there in the saddle twenty minutes, cussing and sweating and telling the bandit how he was Curly Bill's own brother; but he didn't give up the money. The dang fool road agent believed him!"

Sidney Dalton chuckled over one of the Bar D's favorite stories, but Robert Stitt did not feel like laughing. He looked at the girl, frowning. "And is it the same with One-Shot Adams and Ace Spates and the others?"

"One-Shot Adams came up on a prospector trapped in a slide up in Montana years ago. He rode up just as a big grizzly was about to charge the man. There was time enough for a man to draw and fire a single shot. One-Shot made it in time, right between the eyes. And Ace Spates—"

Robert Stitt let his breath out in a long sigh, turning his horse. "Why—why it's just like being knighted, y'know."

"What did you say?" Sidney Dalton leaned close to catch his words, but Stitt waved the remark aside as unimportant, and rode off to help Bluff Crabb chase the stragglers out of the canyon.

BY THE time Stitt caught up with him, Bluff Crabb was far back in the rocks and had dismounted to tighten his saddle cinch. Stitt swung down and walked toward him to express his appreciation for the Bar D foreman's help. He was within arm's reach of the stocky cowboy when the air was electrified by a whirring vibration they both recognized from instinct.

Bluff Crabb straightened with a jerk, and then froze in his tracks. The big diamond-back rattler was coiled on a rocky shelf four feet behind him, its flat head bobbing for a strike. Stitt took another step forward, and then he dived. His shoulders bowled Bluff Crabb over in an ungainly heap just as the snake lashed out and fell off the shelf beyond them.

The rattler writhed almost in front of them, trying to coil again. Stitt grabbed at its scaly tail in desperation. He got it in his hand, and flung the forward part of the squirming body away from him like a muleskinner cracking a whip. The result was much the same. There was a sharp cracking sound, and the snake did not seem hard to hold any more, but he did not know what had happened until Bluff Crabb spoke.

"I'm a sheepherder's uncle," Bluff Crabb croaked, getting his breath. "I've heard tell you could pop a snake's head off thataway, but you're the first hombre I've seen with a hankerin' to try it."

"I'm afraid it was an accident, old chap. Really, I was just trying to knock him against the stones."

Bluff Crabb thought that was the funniest thing he ever heard, and the boys around the Blackjack Bar thought it was funny, too, after the Bar D crew got the Triangle cattle into town and Bluff was telling about the snake-killing.

Robert Stitt didn't even know Ace Spates had heard about it, until the big gray-haired man came down to the loading pens that afternoon where Stitt was still talking with Sidney Dalton. Ace had a stringy, red-haired puncher with him, but he made the man stand aside until he talked with Robert Stitt.

"Boss," Ace said brazenly, "I was wonderin' if you got any objections to my signin' on a new hand to help us out at the Triangle."

Robert Stitt's eyebrows went up in little rainbows for a moment, and then settled over the twinkle in his eyes. "Why, that's in your hands, Ace. Really, I think we might well need him."

Ace brought the redhead over and introduced him. "This is Loop Carter," Ace said. "Loop, meet the boss—Rattlesnake Bob Stitt."

From that day on, no one in Blackjack ever called Robert Hardy Stitt anything but Rattlesnake Bob. He felt it was something that Sir John, a man accustomed to titles, would have looked upon proudly. But there was one thing he never could get quite used to. Years later, when Sidney would step out to the veranda of the big Triangle-Bar D ranch house to meet new guests, he would wince a little every time she'd say: "Hello, there. I'm Mrs. Rattlesnake."

Coming in Next Month's Issue

MANHUNT IN THE SUN

A Gripping Novelet

By STEUART EMERY

WILD DOG

By JIM KJELGAARD

The dog was a primitive throwback, but on a night when the awful, biting cold made the trees shriek, a very strange thing happened

WHAT THE books say is true. There has never been an authentic instance of wolves attacking a human being. But wolves are not much different from other beasts—or from men. An intelligent and crafty leader can make them do a lot of things that otherwise they would never think of doing.

This I know partly because I've been a Forest Ranger in the Tagona district for seventeen years. Besides, if that big wild Labrador, Black Beauty, ever had a civilized life, I knew her throughout at least part of it. It was my daughter, Karen, who came up the Singing Road that night, when snow lay three feet deep on the ground and the awful, biting cold made the trees shriek.

Black Beauty's attack took the wolf by surprise

I got Black Beauty from Dr. Searles, down in Winneshara. The last time he was up fishing he asked me if I wanted her, and after listening to his description I decided that she might be just what I needed. About six times a year I can really use a big, husky, fighting dog. Oh, I've had plenty of dogs. But the big and husky ones just didn't have enough fight, and the fighting ones weren't big enough.

On the day she was to arrive, I drove my pickup down to the Pine Lake station to get her. But before I loaded her crate, I read the letter Doc had tacked to it:

Dear Mac:

Let me warn you again, before you accept this dog, that the best thing you can do is drive her out on some back road and put a slug through her head. There's somethnig about her that shouldn't be, Mac, something that reaches back a million years to when dogs' wild ancestors did what they pleased. You'll never tame her. And, if you decide to accept her, let me tell you once more that your blood is on your own head and I'll be responsible for nothing. Incidentally, she lost the three toes from her right front foot in a fox trap. Cordially,

Doc.

I folded the letter and put it in my pocket, grinning a little as I did so. Wild dog, huh? One that should have been born a million years ago. Doc is something of a mystic, and his special delight is poking scientific naturalists full of holes. Somebody, Doc claims, lays down a set of rules or makes some observations that seem reasonable, and all the rest accept them as gospel truth and try to go on from there.

OF COURSE, most times, that's utterly wrong. But Doc is Doc, and you never saw a more pig-headed cuss or one who believes more firmly in his own theories. Somehow, as I stood there, I remembered his face and his sober words when he'd asked me if I wanted Black Beauty.

"Mac," he said, "a dozen times I've made up my mind to have her shot or gassed. She isn't a dog. She's a beast, a savage, unbelievable thing that doesn't belong. But, somehow, I can't kill her. I'm just unable to rid myself of the conviction that everything's born for a purpose, and she has hers. She's a beast of destiny. All right, I'm crazy. But that thing will have me even more so if I keep her around. If you take her, watch her!"

I grinned harder. You can't be a Ranger without getting to know something about animals, and one of the first things you learn is that there are as many individual personalities among them as there are among humans. But you cannot escape the fact that the leopard is unable to change its spots. No matter whether it's timid or full of fight a deer-mouse is a deer-mouse and a grizzly is a grizzly—oh yes, there are timid grizzlies. By the same token a dog is a dog, of all beasts the best adapted to sharing man's home and hearth, and that can never be changed.

Or—can it? I went over to peer into Black Beauty's slatted crate. A huge beast—she must have weighed fully a hundred pounds—she swung her mighty head to stare at me. But there was no wagging of the tail, no glad whimper, no pricking up of the ears—nothing at all except a steady stare from opaque, yellow eyes. I could neither understand nor control the shiver that traveled up and down my spine.

But I tried to shake it off. I told myself that I'd listened to too much of Doc's prattling, his wonderful, cockeyed theories of things that had been and things that were to be. It was only sensible that a dog was still a dog, an animal that would respond to good food, good care, and understanding.

Or, if everything else failed, they could always be controlled with a club.

Karen was in the yard when I got back. She's sixteen, and one reason she's the stars, sun, and moon to me is that she looks exactly like her mother did when I married her and brought her here to the Tagona Ranger Station. Karen has the same slim blonde beauty,

the same seemingly depthless blue eyes. Incidentally, Karen's the reason why I carry a back load of traps on winter patrols. At Mark Five, three miles up Singing Road, there's a school that runs through all twelve grades. After she's done there, Karen's going to college. I can get along on a ranger's salary. But for sixteen years—eight since Karen's mother died—I've banked every cent of my fur money. There's enough of it to see Karen through college, even if she wants a Ph.D., and she can have pretty dresses as well as whatever else she needs to hold up her end. When I drove into the yard, Karen came running over to the car.

"Oh, Dad, you've got her!"

"Take it easy, squirt," I warned. "She isn't exactly a Pekinese."

"Now don't act like a fuddy-duddy, Dad."

I watched, my eyes wide and my hand on the grip of my .38 as she went to the gate end of Black Beauty's crate and unwired the clips that bound it down. I don't always carry that gun, but this morning I had buckled it on. I believe in little except what my own senses reveal—I'm just made that way. But perhaps there really is a subconscious mind that prompts us. I'd listened to a lot of Doc Searles' talk about his wild dog, and that's why I had the .38 this morning.

But I watched Karen, my ninety-four-pound daughter, lift that gate and saw more than a hundred pounds of beast step out of it. Beauty was like no dog I'd ever seen, and again I felt the cold little shiver run up and down my spine. Abnormally large, even for a Labrador, Black Beauty seemed to have about her something that brought to mind the intelligent eyes and earnest words of Doc Searles. She was not a dog but an anachronism, a thing that belonged to another age. With one little lunge and one slash of her teeth, she might have torn Karen's slender throat out almost before I could have brought my gun into action.

ONLY she didn't. Karen knelt beside her, passed both arms around her neck. I stood amazed, not knowing what to do. It was an eerie scene, one that seemed to take me back to the first person and the first dog.

I shook my head. Here, if ever I'd needed it, was proof that my own ideas were the right ones. A dog was still a dog, the first beast to ally itself with man and the closest to him. More than any other animal, it was part of the fireside and home. From the dowager, who feeds her toy mutt from a silver plate, to the musher, who trusts life itself to his dogs' ability, both dogs and people know that. I tried again to rid myself of any other ideas. Stepping up, I grasped Karen by the shoulder and pulled her erect.

"Hey, I didn't get this hound for a house pet! Don't spoil her on me the first thing!"

"Oh, Dad, she's a—a beauty!" Karen breathed.

I laid my hand on Beauty's head, intending to take her down to the wire-enclosed, wire-topped fence where I keep my dogs. But almost instantly I drew back. Beauty didn't growl. It was more like a rumble springing up in her chest, a threatening, fierce sound that said she would come when she was ready. Beauty turned to look at Karen.

I've heard that all animals, wild and tame, understand most fundamental forces. They know savagery and ruthlessness because by being that way they survive and get their food. And they know well when anything's helpless. Al Kinner, a ranchman, told me that he had a wild stallion which would throw and, if possible, trample any man who got on his back. But let a woman or child mount him and he was gentle as a kitten. I believed that, or anyway, part of it, because I know animals.

And I thought I knew them all the way. A man is the master of anything if only he'll make himself so—I've tamed wolves. But there was that about Black Beauty which bade me halt. She

liked Karen. And she didn't like me. There was something there that was not in any wolf, bear, or anything else I've even seen. Karen laughed.

"I'll go with you, Dad," she said.

And, so help me, the minute she swung in beside me, Beauty followed. With apparent willingness she stepped through the wire gate of the pen when Karen opened it, and she sat watching us as we departed.

The next morning, after Karen had started up the Singing Road to School—she's a junior—I took Beauty out of her pen. She came gladly enough, and obeyed all instructions. Without any hesitation or holding back she followed me down to Clear Pond, and when I dropped a couple of teal, she jumped in to retrieve them. She could swim, too, and was as much at home in the water as any dog I've ever seen.

But, though she did not disobey, I knew even more strongly that Beauty could never be broken. She hunted with me because she wanted to, but would do nothing that she didn't want to. It was almost the way Doc Searles had said it would be. She had a dog's body, but she was still something out of a bygone age, something that had just never learned to submit. We hunted together, companionably enough, all through the autumn.

But Beauty still held something for Karen that she never felt for me. It was nothing tangible, or a quality that might be specifically pointed out. Never once did she wag her tail, or show any of the signs that might reasonably be expected from a normal dog. Rather, when Karen was around, Beauty had an aura about her, an attitude that said here was one person she might like.

It was not until winter came that I knew Doc Searles . . . But who was right?

YOU DON'T know winter in the Tagona. Sure, you might have visited it in summer, fished its smiling blue lakes and bathed in its sun-warmed pools. But the Tagona's winter face is far from a smiling or warm one.

Blizzards sweep out of the north, and they're pushed by huge hands with ice-cold fingers that can go through the warmest clothing you're able to put on. Snow comes on the heels of the blizzards, as though it were a plaything spilled around by some demon. And, when the winter's severe enough, the wolves always come.

It was towards the last of November when I heard them this year. Eight inches of snow lay on the ground, and the sky had cleared as though to give room to a full moon. The light, when I went out, was almost day-bright. The soft moon splashed over everything. I could see every small detail of the garage, the barn, the machine shed, and Beauty's pen. It was then that I heard the wolves.

Much as I've listened to it, I don't yet know how to describe the voice of a wolf. It isn't a shriek, a howl, a yell, or a bark, but sort of a combination of everything. On moonlit nights it drifts down from the timbered ridges like the cry of a lost soul or the despairing yell of what I imagine may be a ghost. Once heard it's never forgotten.

Hearing it this night told me that the wolves had come back to the Tagona. Throughout the warm months they had ranged the wild and almost unmapped country to the north. Winter had driven them down, but they weren't going to find too much here. It was a year of scarcity. The rabbits were dying, grouse were at the bottom of their cycle, and there weren't many deer. Just about every tenth year in the Tagona is like that, and after it hits the low ebb of scarcity, it starts building up to plenty again. I heard the wolves cry again, and went back into the house to tell Karen.

"The wolves are back," I warned her.

"I heard them, Dad."

She looked up from her book, smiled, and went back to studying. Somehow, that was very comforting. Wolves are a part of things. Even though they're

bloody, there's something magnificent about them. It was good to see that Karen was able to appreciate all this, and not give way to dislike.

I went to bed about ten-thirty because I knew that I'd have to be up with daylight. Protecting game in the Tagona is part of my job and controlling the wolves that came to kill was up to me. I breakfasted before daylight, arranged my rifle and snowshoes, and went out to get Beauty.

Only she was no longer there. I'd become accustomed to the fact that she never welcomed me in the morning, but she'd always been either in her kennel or squatting on the snow. Now there was only a round hole bitten by powerful jaws through the mesh fence, and a single line of tracks that led towards a spruce-covered ridge. I returned to the house to find Karen breakfasting.

"Beauty's gone," I told her. "I think she's trying to join that wolf pack."

"Hadn't you expected it?" Karen asked calmly.

It was a surprising answer, and one that momentarily jolted me. Dogs do go off to join wolves, but somehow it had never occurred to me that Beauty might be such a renegade. However, Karen, who had looked deeper into Beauty's brain than any other human had, seemed to accept it as a matter of course. I took my rifle from its rack.

"I'll see you tonight," I told her.

"Good hunting, Dad."

There was no enthusiasm in her voice —but of course she didn't want Beauty killed. However, Karen knew as well as I did that the pack had to be wiped out if it was possible to do so. Wolves can do too much damage for a Forest Ranger's piece of mind, and a renegade dog can be as bad as any animal in the pack.

I FOLLOWED Beauty's track—marked by the absence of three toes on the right front foot—through the snow to a timbered ridge and up it. I half expected to find only her torn and bloody carcass in the snow, for the wolves might not feel like extending membership to a dog. But all I found was where she had met and mingled with the pack. It was then I remembered that she was a female. No doubt some old dog wolf had liked her looks, and through him she had been accepted.

All day I stuck on the pack's trail, and as far as I know never came within even rifle shot of them.

Nor, though I hunted and trapped throughout the winter, did I have any better luck. The wolves were still there; I heard them on the ridges. Beauty was still with them; I knew that by the tracks. And they were a hungry pack. When I ran across their infrequent deer kills, it was to discover the flesh eaten, the bones chewed up to get the marrow within them, and most of the splinters swallowed. Mid-February came with all its bitter cold, and not a wolf scalp had been tacked to my door. I didn't have much of anything else, either, except a few foxes, mink, and ermine.

But February brought both a cessation of the snows that had whirled down since November and intensified cold. It was twenty-three degrees below zero when I got up and looked at the thermometer. Just the same, after breakfast, Karen put on a couple of hickory shirts, wrapped a scarf about her face, and set off for school on her snowshoes. I spent the day about the station, repairing tools, and I think it was about four o'clock in the afternoon when I felt my first pang of fear.

I don't know why I felt it, or how it came about, but it passed through me colder than the winter's day, reached deeper into my vitals than the frost had ever probed. There was just no explanation for it. Shartly after, when the telephone rang, I jumped to answer it.

"Hello, Dad?" it was Karen. "I won't be home until about nine o'clock. I'm staying to help Miss Hanser clear up some work."

For a moment, and I still don't know

why, I had a wild impulse to tell her to come right away, and that I'd come up the Singing Road to meet her. But I didn't. Karen can handle herself in the woods, and often, when she stays to help one or another of her teachers, she comes home after dark.

"All right, honey," I said. "I'll be seeing you."

Darkness crept stealthily down, and almost as soon as its black wing had folded over the day a bright, full moon rode high in the heavens. No doubt it had been there, paled by the sun, all the while. And, with the night, I became almost panicky.

There was something out there tonight that had never been before—an evil, creeping something that could be neither heard nor seen. They say that wild people, such as the Australian bushmen, retain senses that civilized men have long since lost. They can scent danger, and know what's going to happen long before anything does happen.

It seemed that way with me. Tonight was to be one of horror and tragedy, one that would long be remembered and sorrowed over. But I'm still too much the civilized person to give way to such ideas. Reason told me that I was making much ado about nothing; instinct shouted otherwise. I watched the slow hands of the clock crawl around to eight, half past, nine. And the clock had just clicked the hour when I heard a wolf howl.

IT WAS a rolling, mournful sound, and it was choked in the middle as though its maker had suddenly been throttled. But I needed nothing more to tell me that that wolf had howled very close to, if not directly upon, the Singing Road. Karen was coming down that road, snowshoeing between the lonely, frost-tortured trees that lined it. I snatched my rifle from its rack, took my snowshoes from their peg, and was just about to race up the road when I saw her emerge from the forest into the clearing.

"Y-you?" I gasped.

Her voice was muffled through the scarf, "Expecting some other girl friend, Dad?"

"Bu—I heard a wolf on the Singing Road!"

"I heard it too," she said calmly. "Imagine an old-timer like you getting excited about a wolf howl!"

So the books are right, and there has never been an authenticated instance of wolves attacking a human being. But the next day—another cloudy and threatening one—was Saturday. Karen didn't have to go to school and I went up the Singing Road alone. I found the tracks of the pack on Karen's last-night snowshoe trail, and a big gray wolf whose throat had been torn out. I'm not going to stick my neck out and say that they had been chasing Karen; any of a dozen reasons could have brought them to the Singing Road.

But I could reconstruct something from the tracks.

Black Beauty and the dead wolf had been running together, and she had turned suddenly upon him. No doubt he had been taken by surprise; probably he was down before he had a chance to fight, and then Beauty had charged into the pack. There was much blood on the snow, and obviously there had been a furious battle. I followed the tracks into the forest. But another blizzard hit right after that and I lost all trace of them. I never saw Beauty again, and right after that the wolves left the Tagona.

I still don't know who was right. But, on the way home, I thought a lot about Doc Searles. He's a very intelligent man.

It was he who called Black Beauty a dog of destiny.

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On Billy Strong's first stage run, death went along for the ride

The shot came from the coach, its bark flat and deadly

SISKIYOU STAGE

By PHIL RAY

BILLY STRONG watched his partner ride out and he lifted an arm in farewell as horse and rider disappeared in a shallow dip of the road. A man in love, Billy thought, is a plain damn fool at times. He should have warned Jim about making that ride to Portland alone. But they'd had a time for themselves the night before, and the result of this carousing was a blight against the better judgment of both. There was a year in the diggings behind these two, and Jim's saddlebags

were heavy with the profit of that venture. Perhaps the dangers of that long ride hadn't occurred to Billy Strong until this moment because this day was the beginning of things for him. He'd landed that driving job with the C.&O. and even now was beginning to savor the excitement of this first run. With Jim it was a woman—a girl up in Portland who had waited, and that was enough to drive out all of a man's natural caution.

Billy turned back, quickening his pace across the hard-packed red mud of the road, thinking what a fine partnership it had been and feeling a sense of loss over Jim's departure. He walked toward the little cluster of buildings that made up this raw camp, a place unnamed as yet, and untamed. But already it was showing the inevitable signs of development. The California and Oregon stage line had erected a station here; there was a hotel of sorts and a restaurant and a place where a man could spend his gold on raw liquor and entertainment of a kind. The Palace—a haven for transient gambling men and fortune-hungry females.

He looked northward once more. Jim was out of sight now, a retreating figure lost somewhere in the green humps and folds of the Siskiyous. A man in love, Billy thought, and wondered what it was like. With stage time still a long way off, he managed to kill an hour eating a second breakfast and smoking a leisurely cigar. When he came out of the restaurant he headed for the C.&O. office, a man still young enough to have a rangy awkwardness in his stride, and trying hard to hold himself down to a slow, swaggering walk.

The agent was a graying, middle-aged man with great drooping mustaches. He poured a measure of gold dust from the bronze balance scales into a pouch and placed this in the heavy safe. He turned to his new driver. "Heard you and Jim was out late last night."

Billy sensed a note of disapproval in this. When you were driving stage they expected you to stay sober and keep out of trouble. There were responsibilities that went with the job. They had warned him about that. Billy grinned at the agent, his eyes holding bold laughter. "Just a little celebration, Ed. I feel all right this morning."

The agent grinned too, relenting. After all, Billy was a natural-born driver and that was the main thing. Besides, he was just a kid and at times a young man had to let off steam. "Just so's you can get that mud wagon over the pass," he said. "I suppose Jim has already lit out."

Billy nodded. "Probably half way to Portland by now."

The agent stroked his mustache thoughtfully. "He's packing too big a wad to be safe. Jim was ordinarily a sensible kid. You could've talked him out of it."

"Guess I could've," Billy agreed. But he hadn't and he knew he hadn't because it was the kind of thing Billy himself might have done—a foolish, reckless thing. He hadn't bothered to think twice about it. "Reckon Jim can take care of hisself," he said, trying to compensate.

"Let's hope so," the agent grumbled and went out back to help with the teams.

IN HALF and hour they were ready to roll and Billy circled the four-horse team, inspecting rigging and hoofs, the responsibility of this first run warming him. Old Abe Jennings was messenger this trip and he was at the rear of the coach, carelessly tossing luggage into the boot. It was still early and save for this one place of arrival and departure, the camp was quiet. A lone horseman, dressed respectfully in dark broadcloth, rode in from the north at a leisurely gait. He rode toward the hotel and disappeared in the big livery barn at the rear.

The passengers began to file out of the stage office, preceded by Ida Fontaneau, the girl who waited on tables at the Frenchman's place. Billy had always thought of her as a plain girl in looks and in manner. She carried a dark blue parasol, matching the heavy material of her traveling dress. Her father, the burly Pierre, stood beside her, his big hand

placed affectionately on the girl's shoulder.

"You take care of my girl, Billee," Pierre said. "She 'as nevair been away from her papa before."

Ida smiled up at her father and then at Billy. "Papa is sending me north to stay with my aunt," she explained. "I'm going to attend school there until spring."

"Nothing to worry about," Billy said to the girl's father. "Reckon I can get her there all right." He helped the girl into the coach and was startled at the soft yielding of her arm against the pressure of his fingers.

"Ah," Pierre said, clapping Billy's shoulder, "I know you will watch out for my little girl. I am not worry." He maneuvered his big shoulders through the coach doorway and kissed the girl's forehead lightly. "Goodbye, *ma petite.*"

A woman in light green satin came out of the stage office and a pair of miners stepped aside for her. She gave Billy a warm, practiced smile and allowed him to hand her into the coach. Seated, she looked down at him, the bold smile remaining, as though there were some joke which the two of them had shared. The Palace, Billy thought, hauling his memory into focus. Last night's affair was still a haze in the back of his mind. For an instant he could not help comparing this woman with the girl beside her. The woman's beauty seemed harsh, the barely discernible lines about her eyes and mouth, which should have softened her features, seemed instead to chill them. Ida's face was gently rounded with a young girl's loveliness. Her hair was black as a Pitt River squaw's, but with a softness to it, a contrast against the china whiteness of her skin. It gave her a look of delicacy which was pleasantly deceiving. Why, Ida was really a pretty girl, Billy thought, and wondered why he'd never noticed it before.

A pair of booted miners took their places in the coach, followed by a prosperous-looking cattleman from the San Joaquin. He was a short, slender man, neatly dressed, with the proud aristocracy of a Californio written across his darkly handsome face. Billy noticed the slight bulge beneath the man's coat and the lithe, easy way he climbed into the coach.

Abe Jennings came around from the rear. Billy glanced down at the waybill. "Should be one more, Abe."

Jennings shifted his cud casually from one cheek to the other. He pointed carelessly with the double-barreled shotgun. "Reckon this is him comin' now."

THE stout man hurried toward them from the hotel. He carried a dark traveling bag which appeared heavy enough to impede his progress. The blue broadcloth was rumpled and the man's string tie had come undone. The black ribbon sprawled carelessly across his white shirtfront. Perspiration spotted his pale forehead. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I had some business. Are we ready to leave?"

His hands were slender and white, almost feminine. They fluttered nervously as he talked. Gambling man, Billy thought. A man's hands reflected his calling and these were the deft, sensitive hands of a dealer. The Palace, Billy thought again, and wondered how much he had lost to this man last night.

Jennings took the bag from the man and tossed it into the boot.

"My bag," the gambler said, hesitating, "will it be all right back there? I mean—there's no chance of losing it?"

"Get in," Billy said. "There's always a chance. You should know that."

"Yes. Yes, of course." The gambler laughed nervously. "You're right. Everything's a gamble, isn't it?" He climbed awkwardly into the coach.

Billy lifted himself easily onto the high seat and took up the ribbons. Jennings came up beside him, grunting with the strain. He set the green box of dust under his feet and placed the shotgun across his lap. He pursed his lips carefully and doused a fly on the rump of the off-wheeler. "Let's git outa here, Billy."

Billy kicked off the brake and let out a yell that would shame a Comanche.

Leaders and wheelers took up slack in the rigging. Sharp hoofs took hold in the dirt. Leather popped. It was a jolting start. Billy took the first turn so furiously that the coach swayed drunkenly for a breathless moment, both right wheels suspended. Billy laughed as Jennings clung desperately to the hand rail, nearly losing his scattergun.

Abe Jennings sent an amber stream over the side. "Tryin' to set a new record, youngster? I rode with Hank Monk in the old days. He could do better than that. Mr. Greeley can tell you, by gum!"

Billy threw his laughter into the wind. "Keep your seat, Horace!" It was a story worn thin among old-time drivers.

HE WAS feeling the adventure and excitement of it as they began climbing into the foothills. Billy handled the team easily and with a sureness that even Jennings silenty acknowledged. The road leveled off at a stretch of timber. They were in the Siskiyous now and soon the climb would be steep, the road narrow and lined with deep ruts. Billy slowed the team to a walk. A saddled horse grazed in a small meadow on their left, reins trailing and tangled in deep grass. Billy hauled up on the ribbons, set the brake. Dust came up and hovered about them.

"Better keep moving," Jennings said uneasily. "Might be someone we don't want to meet."

"It's Jim's horse," Billy said and came off the high seat in one leap.

He ran out into the clearing. It was Jim's horse, all right. When Billy reached it he found the saddlebags empty. The result of a year's digging gone, Lord knew where.

They located Jim's body in grass alongside the road. The bullet had pierced his chest—a big, powerful slug by the looks of it.

"Likely he never knew what hit him," Abe Jennings said. "Don't know why he had to go galavantin' through these hills heeled the way he was."

Billy shook his head slowly, feeling the nausea and anger rising in his throat. "Jim was in a hurry. Figured he'd get there faster traveling alone this way." He knew the words were meaningless. Guilt was in him and making excuses wasn't any good.

The two miners, their faces hard, looked down at the body with distaste. The gambler's face blanched; his soft hands were shaking. Jim was not a pretty sight and the looks of him had its effect even against the hardened visage of the ranchero, who had doubtless seen worse things on his own range. The Californio glanced up at Billy. "He was a friend of yours?"

Billy nodded.

"We can't leave him here. We'll help you bury him."

The inquiring face of the Palace woman peered from the coach. "What happened? Is anything wrong?"

"The four of you can tend to the buryin'," Jennings said. "I'll stay with the women. Besides, I've got to keep my eye on that green box." He turned to his driver and placed his rough hand on Billy's arm. "Sorry, son. It's a hard country. A man takes his chances."

They found a soft place at the edge of the clearing and dug a shallow grave here, covering the spot with stones against the weather and animals. Surprisingly, the ranchero produced a Bible and when the job was finished he read from it over the spot where Jim was buried. An incongruous figure, Billy thought, this man with an instrument of faith against his palm, another of death beneath the tails of his coat; a man who was well acquainted with the violence of the land and tempered to match it, yet who had not been devoured by its crudities.

WHEN it was done they walked back across the meadow. Billy caught Jim's horse and tied it to the rear of the mud wagon. The women had waited outside the stuffy coach. The Palace woman and the gambler climbed in. The others followed, but Ida Fontaneau waited and when Billy came forward her hand detained him, resting softly against his arm.

"You're blaming yourself, Billy. You shouldn't."

Again he was struck by the natural beauty of this girl and the strange thing that her eyes did to him with their softness.

"I might've talked Jim out of it if I was so minded," Billy said. "We were partners. We worked together for a year. But it ain't Jim alone. He was going back to Portland to get married. It'll go hard on the girl."

"Yes," Ida said, "there is always a woman who suffers."

"I wish I knew," Billy said. "I wish I knew who done it."

Ida let her hand fall from his sleeve. For a moment there was a look of twisted fear in her face, as though she knew what Billy was thinking and was repulsed by it.

"I'd kill him," Billy said. "I'd kill him if I knew who he was."

"And you'll spend the rest of your life hating yourself if you don't find him." The girl's eyes hardened for an instant, then found their warmth again. "Forget it, Billy. It wasn't your fault." She turned from him and without his help pulled herself into the coach.

They continued through the timber and out of it, into the high country where junipers and pines were stunted and boulders lined the road, sometimes overhanging it ominously with scant clearance for the heads of driver and messenger. Jennings glanced at his big silver watch. "About another hour to Station One," he said. "We'll change to six horses there. She gets worse after that."

They hit a downgrade and Billy's foot levered the brake a trifle too much. The wheels jammed. Traces strained and the teams reared back at the pressure against their collars. The coach skidded sideways and came up against the bank before Billy thought to ease his pressure and set it right again.

Abe Jennings spat. "Don't let this thing get you down, Billy. I've seen it happen before. These hills are swarming with varmints, all of 'em hungry for gold. Ain't one chance in a thousand you'd find the man who done it."

They jolted to the bottom of the grade and found themselves at the mouth of a steep-sided canyon. The road from here was a steep and slithering ascent of the canyon wall. Billy slipped his foot off the brake and was about to stir the team into a run when Jennings stiffened beside him.

A horseman came out of the brush ahead of them, a long-barreled rifle in his hand. He signaled for the coach to stop.

"This may be your answer," Jennings said. "If it is he's getting greedy. Don't get any bright ideas."

The horseman's rifle pointed with authority to the top button on Jenning's linsey shirt. He rode up to them warily, his glance covering the passengers and the men on the box. He spoke softly to Jennings. "The shotgun first," he said. "And throw it down easy. Then the box."

Jennings threw the shotgun down so that its barrel struck first.

"That's right," the man said. "Now that little green box under your feet. Real careful like, so nobody gets hurt."

JENNINGS reached down and when he came up with the box in both hands Billy saw the gleaming five-inch barrel of the Wells Fargo model Colt hidden behind it. Jennings tossed the box down and, as the road agent's eyes instinctively followed it, Abe pulled the trigger.

The shot, fired in haste, went wild, crashing into the brush beyond the man. The bandit countered swiftly with a shot that caught Jennings below the shoulder, rocking him back. Billy clutched Abe's collar and saved him from going over the side. Jennings' shirt front was already dampening with blood. His revolver clattered to the dashboard.

Another shot bellowed from beneath them and Billy knew the Californio had seen his chance and was taking it. The bandit swayed in his saddle. The shock drained color from his face and his hand groped awkwardly at the wound in his

side. The cattleman fired his second shot, aiming high. The bandit recovered long enough to let loose a blast toward the lower part of the coach. Billy still clung to Jennings. He heard something drop heavily in the coach below him. A heaving body swayed the coach slightly and he knew the cattleman had been hit. The Palace woman screamed.

The road agent centered his rifle on Billy now, his face chalk white and deadly. "Get moving," he said. "Don't stop till you've got to where you're going."

Billy whipped the horses into a run.

Jennings was coming out of it now, the initial shock spent, acute pain beginning to throb in his chest. He muttered something to Billy. "Behind you—under the tarp. Whiskey."

Billy reached for the bottle and pulled the cork out with his teeth. He poured a heavy slug down Jenning's throat. The messenger leaned back, taking the bottle in his own hand. He sloshed some of its contents on the wound, grinning weakly. "Guaranteed to cure snake bite or lead poisonin'," he said. "I'm all right now, Billy. Just git us there fast as you can. Reckon I ain't the only casualty."

Billy tossed the whip around the ears of the lead team. The horses pulled the jolting wagon swiftly up the winding, rutted road. Billy glanced back. The road agent was out of sight now. Jim's horse remained at the rear, its ears laid back, disliking this. Billy took the bottle away from Jennings, corked it and replaced it under the tarp. He picked up the .31 Colt and shoved it beneath his belt. Jennings was all right now. He could hold on for a little while, at least until they reached the station. Billy shoved the reins toward him. "Abe, I'm going after him."

"What? Billy, you're crazy."

"On Jim's horse," Billy said. "I've got a hunch. Maybe he's the one who laid for Jim."

Jennings wiped whiskey from his mouth with the back of his hand. "They'll fire you, Billy. You ain't supposed to leave the stage. You know that."

"They ain't going to fire me if they don't know about it." Billy put the ribbons in Jennings' protesting hands and crawled back across the tarp. He slid down onto the boot and untied the reins.

"I'll catch up with you at the station," he hollered, then dropped off.

HE LANDED falling, sharp rocks and gravelly shale sending pain through his back and shoulders. The frightened horse tried to pull away. Billy clung tightly to the reins. He got up and mounted the skittish animal, making sure the revolver was still in his belt. He laid the rein ends sharply across the horse's shoulders, sending it down the grade at a swift run. If he could pick up the man's trail it wouldn't be hard to overtake him. The man would be burdened with the gold and Billy figured he wouldn't be inclined to leave it behind, regardless of the fact that the man was hurt. That little green box held close to ten thousand dollars worth of dust.

He kept to the road until he came to the bottom of the slope. Jennings' scattergun still lay in the gravel where he had thrown it. Billy picked it up, carrying it across the pommel while he searched for tracks that left the road. He felt the precious moments moving by and impatience was mounting in him before he finally picked up the trail. The fresh tracks led to a path which wound tortuously down a lava-strewn slope.

Billy plunged his horse down the incline. The rocky path offered treacherous footing. The man might have a camp near here, Billy thought, and every hidden bend in the trail was a potential death trap. He slowed the animal to a walk and then cautiously left the trail, traveling above it.

He saw the man then, far below him, staying to the trail and moving slowly, his figure limp over the neck of his mount. Billy judged the distance. The man was worse off than he had thought. But he could still be dangerous. Like a wounded mountain lion, Billy thought. It wouldn't do to rush in without figuring his chances first.

Billy studied the winding of the trail a moment before moving on. He began the ascent of a high ridge, forcing the horse to a straight uphill climb. The footing was treacherous and the animal stumbled twice. Billy dismounted and picketed the mount to a clump of chaparral. He continued the climb afoot, making better time this way. When he reached the top his lungs ached and sweat had drenched the back of his shirt. He scanned the country that lay below him.

The trail wound around the ridge and, as Billy had guessed, made a complete circle of it in its downward course. Far below, he could hear the distant murmur of running water, and through the trees he could make out the course of the river. The trail wound slowly downward towards it. The bandit was a slow-moving speck a good five hundred yards below him now, but behind him too. Again Billy made a swift calculation and started down cautiously at an oblique angle to the trail.

His boots loosened shale and, for all his caution, started miniature landslides that preceded him. Billy stopped once, waiting until the rider came into view, making sure he had not been heard. The man still clung to the green box, still slumped over the saddle. Billy started down again, more careful now. The distance between them had been cut in half. Good shooting distance for a long-barreled rifle, Billy thought, but something less than ideal for a revolver or a scattergun.

WHEN Billy reached the trail the approaching rider was near enough so that he could hear the crunching steps of the horse against gravel. Billy hid himself behind a boulder until the man was directly in front of him. He poked his head over the rock's rim, leveling the Colt across its face. His single word echoed through the canyon: "Reach!"

The bandit hauled up, his face lifted, showing its pale look of pain and surprise. His eyes focused upon Billy in a glassy, agonized stare. "You can go to hell," he said, and lifted the rifle.

Billy sent a single shot toward the man and he tumbled from the saddle, landing heavily. The green box went with him and the man lay with it beneath his belly.

Billy caught the frightened horse and made a hasty search of the saddlebags. Save for a few hardened biscuits and a package of dried beef, they were empty. Jim's gold would have been here had this been his killer. The man wouldn't have cached it and then robbed the stage, knowing how hot this country would become for him, that he would immediately have to light out for distant places.

Revenge, Billy thought, and suddenly remembered what Ida had said: *You'll spend the rest of your life hating yourself if you don't find him.* How could she have known him so well? For right now Billy was hating himself worse than he had ever hated any man.

He walked over to the fallen man and turned him roughly, surprised to discover there was still life in him. Billy had left himself easy prey for a shot in the back and realized then that it had been a foolish chance to take. The bandit tried to raise himself with both arms. Blood trickled slowly from his mouth and his lips curled repulsively at the taste of it. He tried to say something and, failing in this, fell back and died.

Billy picked up the box and mounted the man's horse. He rode back to the place where he had picketed the other mount and, leading it, found the road again. Riding back, he had time to let his thoughts sift slowly over the things that had occurred earlier that morning, thinking there might be an answer somewhere.

Not one chance in a thousand, Jennings had said. Billy knew the odds were at least that. There was nothing to go on; no clues, no real evidence. Only a small nagging in the back of his mind now. A hunch. He let his thoughts drift again. That one possible chance in a thousand and one. A gambler figured his odds and took his chances—and Billy was a gambling man. He had gambled when he came to this country; he gambled against the diggings and he had won. He gambled

his life every time he took up the ribbons and started that long haul across the Siskiyous. He had gambled last night and he had drunk and his mind had been dulled by this. But it was clearing now . . .

THE coach stood empty in the yard of the stage station. Smoke drifted from the rock chimney of the house. Billy went in and found the passengers seated at a large table, finishing their meal. A fat woman moved her bulk silenty between table and kitchen.

Jennings got up. A thick bandage bulged beneath his shirt. "By God, Billy, we'd about giyen you up." He took the heavy green box and carefully tucked it under his arm.

Ida came from the table, carrying the parasol, her dark blue skirt rustling softly. "We're glad, Billy. But you didn't find what you wanted, did you?"

Billy shook his head.

"The other man died," Ida said. "The cattleman. He was brave. But a fool. The loss of the gold would have meant nothing to him. He should have stayed out of it."

She slid by him then and went outside.

Billy looked at the other passengers. "It's time to leave," he said.

"Best have a bite to eat," Jennings offered.

Billy grinned. "My first run, Abe. I'd ought to get through on time. We're late now."

The passengers filed out and Billy followed them to the waiting stage. Going to the rear of the coach, he reached into the boot and pulled out a heavy black bag. The hunch. That one in a thousand and one. Only it was more than a hunch now.

He was recalling now that the gambler had ridden in from the north, the direction Jim had taken. Billy had thought nothing of it at the time, or of why the gambler should be out riding at such an early hour after an all-night session in which he had taken much of Billy's money and some of Jim's. And he would have

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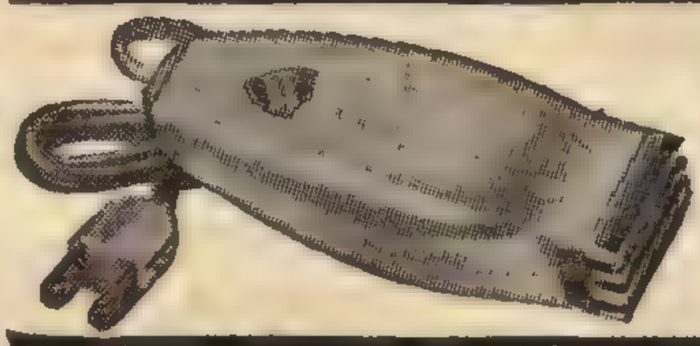

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These things all fell into place in Billy's mind now, even the time element. The gambler would have had two hours in which to ambush Jim and get back to catch the stage. And he'd just made it. Billy remembered too how nervous the man had seemed.

He watched the two miners help the ladies into the coach, then crawl in themselves. The stout gambler was about to enter.

"YOU," Billy called. "A moment." The gambler paused, his foot on the rail. "Yes?"

"What was that business that held you up this morning?"

The man eyed him narrowly, curiously. Billy could sense the danger in the way the man took up a calculated stance. Still, it was a gamble and it might not work.

"My business," the man said.

Billy tossed the heavy black bag to the ground. It fell open and the bags of gold spilled from it.

The gambler's small white hand was swift and sure and as Billy saw that hand begin to move the thought flashed through him that his bluff had worked. There was still no proof, for the gold could not be traced. But he had taken the man off his guard.

The hand came forward now with the pocket derringer almost hidden in it. Billy groped for the weapon at his belt, knowing this was of his own choosing, knowing even then that he was too late.

The shot came from the coach. Its bark was flat and deadly. The derringer spilled unfired from the gambler's white hand. Blood spurted from the ragged wound in his throat. He was dead while still on his feet.

Billy moved to the door of the coach. The face of the Palace woman was ugly and sick with fright. The two miners stared at Ida Fontaneau, scarcely believing what they had seen. The girl returned the tiny, smoking weapon into the folds of her blue parasol and looked down calmly at Billy. "Papa gave it to me," she said,

"just in case . . ."

The woman in green began to cry and Ida placed a comforting arm around her. The woman's sobs became louder, almost hysterical. She shook violently for a moment and then suddenly stopped and looked down at Billy through her tears. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry about the whole thing."

And then Billy understood. "You were with him in this."

She nodded. "He was my husband."

So she too had gambled, Billy thought, and lost. There was nothing he could say. Somehow he felt sorry for the woman, knowing that her loss had been the greatest. Now there was nothing for her. And there was nothing anyone could do to help. He turned away abruptly.

They reached the end of the run before dark. Billy pulled in past Chitwood's drug store and the Post Office, bringing the team to a smooth halt. Jennings glanced at his silver watch with a flourish. "We made it, Billy."

Billy leaped clear of the coach and jerked the door open. Ida smiled down at him and allowed herself to be helped out. Billy removed his hat and in an exaggerated gesture of chivalry bowed deeply from the waist. He felt foolish for having done it, but when he looked at Ida the warmth of her smile encountered him. A man in love, Billy thought, is a plain damn fool at times.

He took her arm again as she stepped to the plank walk. He was trying to calculate how often his schedule would allow him time at this end of the run. Whatever it was it would not be often enough, he thought, but then he guessed it would have to do. At least for now.

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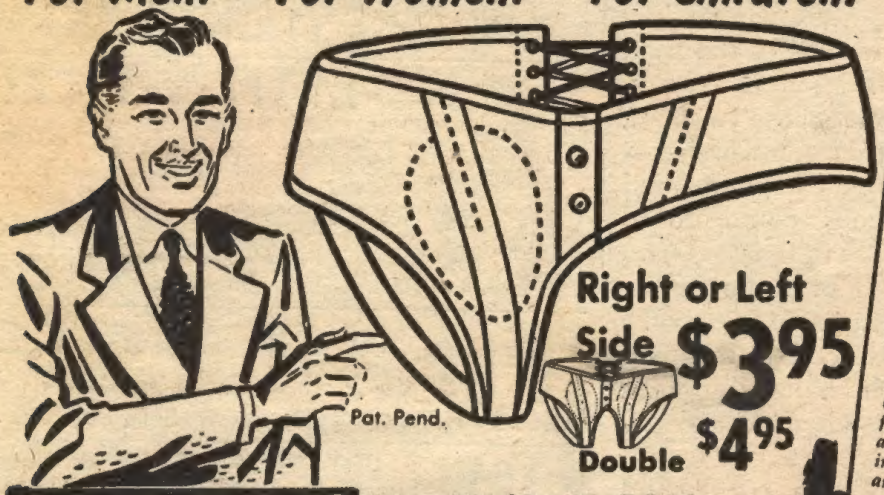

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Mrs. N.B.P., Pittsburgh, Pa., writes: "I can't say enough in favor of your company, the way my expenses were taken care of when I was struck by a car. Thanking you again . . . "

V.M.B., Cleveland, Ohio, writes: "We're both in good health, have been members of another association for a long time, but with the higher cost of everything, one Policy isn't adequate protection. That is the reason we're buying additional North American protection. The other Policy pays direct to the Hospital, so any benefits from your Policy will be paid to policyholder.

THIS IS AMERICA'S NEWEST & GREATEST HOSPITALIZATION VALUE! SOLD ONLY BY MAIL! GOOD ANYWHERE IN THE U. S.

Let's talk plainly. Most Hospital Insurance Policies won't meet the full costs of a hospital confinement. Either benefits are too small, or time limited. Then you must dig into family savings to pay the difference. The remarkable NORTH AMERICAN PLAN pays benefits as long as you stay in the hospital — NO TIME LIMIT! Pays cash direct to you — regardless of what you collect from any other insurance for same disability. Costs only 3c a day — half rate for children!

Vitally needed EXTRA protection if already insured! Best protection at lowest cost if not insured!

ACCIDENTAL DEATH and POLIO INCLUDED! One Policy covers individual or entire family, birth to age 70. In addition to Hospital Room and Board Benefits (Rest homes, sanitariums and Govt. Hospitals excluded)—you get Cash Benefits for 74 surgical Operations . . . Lump Cash for Accidental Death . . . Cash Payment for Loss of Eyes, Hands, Feet . . . special Polio Protection, plus other valuable protection included. Maternity Rider available at slight extra cost. No waiting period. We pay **CASH DIRECT TO YOU!** Be wise! Get FREE BOOK which tells all about this remarkable, low cost insurance value.

NORTH AMERICAN MUTUAL INSURANCE COMPANY
WILMINGTON 99 DELAWARE

DON'T WAIT 'TIL IT'S TOO LATE!

If sickness or accident puts you in a hospital bed—you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out North American protection. The cost is so low—a matter of just pennies a day — you can't afford to be without it. Ask anyone who's been through a siege of hospital bills. They'll tell you what a blessing it is to have good, safe Hospitalization to fall back on. So Act Today! Do it before trouble strikes!

GET FREE BOOK!

Truly this is a remarkable Hospitalization Plan. Gives you extra cash when you need it most. Investigate it! Compare it! Buy it! Mail coupon for Free Book. NO OBLIGATION! NO AGENT WILL CALL!

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Dept. 852-TG, Wilmington 99, Delaware

Please send me, without obligation, full details about your new, low cost NO TIME LIMIT HOSPITAL PLAN. No agent will call.

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Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

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AUTO SEAT COVER BARGAINS!

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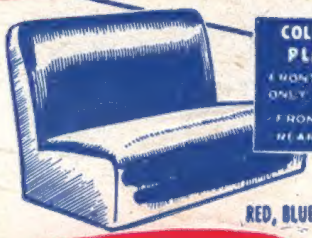
SAVE UP TO 50%



COLORFUL PLASTIC FRONT ONLY $1.98 FRONT AND REAR $3.89

RED, BLUE or GREEN

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WHAT A BUY!

Free! 10 DAY TRIAL

Now at last you can have smart seat covers that will protect your upholstery and add distinction to your car at amazingly low cost. These remarkable seat covers are tailored of miracle plastic in rich, lustrous colors. New snap-on action hold them tight. FITS ALL CARS. Colorfast. Will not fade . . . will not shrink. Waterproof, stainproof, greaseproof. Resists burns. Cleans easily with damp cloth.

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Simulated LEOPARD FRONT ONLY $2.98 FRONT AND REAR $5

New WINDSHIELD WASHER Introductory Offer $1.69

- SIMPLER TO OPERATE
- EASIER TO INSTALL
- LOWER IN COST

Guaranteed trouble free operation . . . outperforms $8.95 custom models. Can't clog . . . easy to refill. Visible fluid supply. One filling cleans windshield 35 times. **TRY 10 DAYS ON YOUR CAR AT OUR RISK.** Act now . . . this low price can't last.

FLEXIBLE SUN VISOR

Approved by: Police, Safety Bureaus, Insurance Companies, Truck Drivers.

ONLY $1.00

Like looking through fine sun glasses! Stops glare without reducing vision. **No tools,** no bolts, **no screws,** no glue! Adheres permanently to the **inside** of your windshield. You'll wonder how you ever drove without it!

New Miracle AUTOMATIC AUTO WASHER 3 FEET LONG!

Special Offer $3.95

De Luxe Model, 4 foot long with shut-off valve, 4.95.

STOP SPENDING MONEY ON CAR WASHING

R. V. REED, noted Cadillac Sales Manager says: "It's like magic. Cars practically wash themselves."

Attach this miracle washer to your garden hose and watch it float dirt and grime off your car in less than 10 minutes. A few washings will repay its small cost. New model has features never before incorporated in one washer: Luster-tone plastic head defies breakage . . . rust-proof aluminum handle gives reach without weight . . . all brass couplings last a lifetime. Extra large brush of soft Morlon bristles will never mat, shed, or tangle. Gently soaks, scrubs, washes and rinses automatically.

Luster-tone plastic head can't break. Soft Morlon Bristles can't mat or tangle. Rust-proof aluminum handle gives reach without weight.

AMAZING New WATCH with MECHANICAL BRAIN

- It "Remembers"
- It Tells Time
- It Tells Date

Included 1 year Guarantee and Lifetime Certificate of Service

Measures Speed • Measures Distance • Records Up to 12 Hours • OVER 40 QUALITY FEATURES.

Precision Jeweled. Imported Swiss Movement. Accurate. Dependable. Push-Button Stop and Start. Red Sweep-Second Hand. Unbreakable Crystal. Triple Chrome Plated Case. Shock Resistant. **Nite-Vue Radium Glow Dial.** Anti-Magnetic. Times Shop work. Times Photography. Times Sports. Times Races. Times Lab. work. Times Planes. Expansion Band Included.

Compare It at $50.00

SPECIAL OFFER $8.95 Plus 90c Fed. Tax

100% GUARANTEE Your Money Promptly Refunded If You Are Not Delighted

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DETROIT 6, MICHIGAN

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Make of Car_____

☐ 2-Door ☐ 4-Door ☐ Coupe

Other: _____

Circle Color: RED BLUE GREEN

☐ SOLID TONE ☐ PLAID

☐ LEOPARD ☐ ZEBRA

☐ *Front Only* ☐ *Front & Rear*

☐ WINDSHIELD WASHER

☐ AUTO SUN VISOR

☐ AUTO WASHER

☐ DELUXE AUTO WASHER

☐ CALENDAR WATCH

☐ COMPASS WATCH

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

☐ Send Items checked. I will pay Postman Plus Postage.

SAVE MORE!

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- TELLS DIRECTION
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The most practical watch ever devised for OUTDOOR MEN! Guaranteed accurate timekeeper with a dependable compass right on the dial. **Check your direction at a glance.** Features gleaming chrome-plated case, **non-shatter** crystal and embossed genuine leather strap. Ruggedly built for rough, outdoor treatment! Order today while this introductory low price lasts.

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